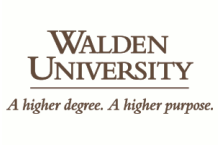

2021

The Use of Vocational Services by Formerly Incarcerated Citizens Who Obtained Employment

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

The Use of Vocational Services by Formerly Incarcerated Citizens Who Obtained Employment

by

Marianne Gonta

MS, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2015

BS, Buffalo State College, 1985

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

Walden University

February 2021

Abstract

Almost 2.3 million people are incarcerated in correctional facilities across the United States. More than 95% of this population will be released to return to society at some time. People returning from prison can be at a disadvantage as they compete for work. They might be challenged by known barriers to employment, like restrictions on work opportunities and powerful stigma, resulting in a social problem. While some correctional facilities provide vocational services, 75% or more of citizens returning to U.S. communities from prison cannot obtain sustainable wage employment. Yet, it appears there is little research illuminating the pathways used by people who have attained sustainable wages after incarceration. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe the diverse perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens to learn if and how they used vocational services to obtain employment. Person-centered counseling philosophy and the theory of career choice framed this study. Telephone interviews with six case participants who obtained sustainable employment after at least one year in prison provided rich subjective data. Content and thematic analysis resulted in the emergence of six overarching themes. The themes indicated that, to supplement education, technical skills, and work experience, formerly incarcerated citizens developed virtuous qualities to acquire sustainable work. The case study results may contribute to social change by providing knowledge about supporting citizens returning from prison for individual, family, and community well-being.

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Dedication

For incarcerated people imagining a better future and those transitioning and searching for meaningful work – Go after success, whatever that is to you. Do whatever it takes. It'll be worth it. Be humble and ask for help. Be grateful for, well, everything, including the hard times. You're stronger for enduring them. Make good from adversity. Persist with determination, no matter what. Find yours, and live with a positive purpose. Forgive yourself. Show the world your worth. You've got this!

Acknowledgments

Thank you, Mom, Dad, and Jake, for the support and encouragement you gave that made achieving this milestone on my life journey possible. I love you. I hope I have made you proud.

Thank you, Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson, for being my guide and holding that light so I could see my way along this long road. I am truly grateful that you shared your time and wisdom with me.

Thank you, Dr. Curt Sobolewski, Dr. Tracy Phillips, and all the Walden University instructors who worked with and encouraged me. I hope to pay your help and inspiration forward.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in correctional facilities (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). More than 95% of this population will be released to return to free communities at some time (Carson, 2018; James, 2015; Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). In 2016, approximately 626,000 formerly incarcerated citizens reentered communities across the country after serving years or decades in correctional institutions (Carson, 2018; Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). Significant numbers of citizens reentering communities after incarceration become a burden to society (Barnao, Ward, & Robertson, 2016; Western et al., 2015) because many lack the education or workforce skills necessary for securing sustainable wage employment (Rukus et al., 2016; Western et al., 2015). Researchers have reported that as many as 75% of citizens who return to communities from prisons may be unemployed or underemployed 1 year after release (Johnson & Cullen, 2015). These individuals may be incapable of sustaining independence or achieving well-being (Duwe & Clark, 2017; Looney & Turner, 2018). Instead, they may be at high risk for recidivism (the return to criminal behaviors) and subsequent reincarceration (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; National Employment Law Project [NELP], 2016).

In this chapter, I introduce my study. I provide background and state my research problem, purpose, and research question. I explain the theoretical framework that guided my research and highlighted the fundamentals of my research design. Next, I define study-related terms as I used them in this research. I then describe the assumptions I

made in planning this research and my study's scope and limitations. Finally, I explain the significance of my research and the populations for whom my work may be useful as an original contribution to research literature.

Background

According to Davis et al. (2013), on average, formerly incarcerated citizens have lower education levels than the general population, often lack vocational skills, and have weak or interrupted employment histories. Limited opportunities to improve these shortcomings over extended periods in prison may also make it challenging to find and maintain sustainable wage employment that supports well-being after release (Davis et al., 2013; Duwe, 2017; Looney & Turner, 2018). To help them navigate these common employment challenges, people returning to society from prison often need vocational rehabilitation services and assistance finding employment (Cantora, 2015; Samele et al., 2018). However, vocational services are not always available during incarceration, and employment assistance for released individuals may be lacking in communities (Cantora, 2015; Samele et al., 2018).

Educational and vocational programming is evidenced in research to improve reentry outcomes for people returning to society from incarceration (Duwe, 2018; Looney & Turner, 2018). In adult correctional facilities, such programs commonly include academic classes for people who did not achieve a high school diploma to earn a general equivalency diploma (GED) and technical skill courses designed to help people prepare for entry-level jobs after prison release (Davis et al., 2013). Additionally, during incarceration, some correctional facilities offer specialized college-level programs (Davis

et al., 2014), participation in the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (Prison Entrepreneurship Program, 2018), and employment experience with various state programs offered through Prison Industries factories (Peláez, 2019). However, according to Smith (2016) and Sawyer and Wagner (2019), only about 6% of the people incarcerated in correctional facilities across the United States have opportunities to enroll in these programs. Smith (2016) noted that the lack of opportunities for more people to access these programs might contribute to community reintegration problems for these citizens after release. Furthermore, according to Cantora (2015) and Smith (2016), transitional programs that help people connect in-custody vocational training to sustainable wage employment in society after release are also commonly lacking.

According to researchers, barriers to employment, such as lacking education and technology skills (Davis et al., 2014; Delaney et al., 2016; Ring & Gill, 2017), parole stipulations and laws (Harding et al., 2018), and challenges related to social stigma (Rade et al., 2018), commonly impede formerly incarcerated citizens' efforts to obtain sustainable wage work. Yet, about 25% of citizens find and maintain employment after incarceration to sustain their autonomy and well-being (Looney & Turner, 2018). Previous researchers have suggested that learning about these citizens' pathways to achieving sustainable wage employment and well-being may illuminate how to improve programs for helping others (Bender et al., 2016; Haas & Spence, 2017).

Problem Statement

People returning to communities from incarceration may need assistance finding employment for successful reintegration (Derzis et al., 2017; Duwe, 2015; Harley, 2014;

Valentine & Redcross, 2015). However, due to funding restrictions, it can be challenging for correctional facilities and home communities to provide employment services to all people who need this support (Davis et al., 2014; Sawyer & Wagner, 2019; Smith, 2016). The problem is that, while there are vocational services provided for some people during and after incarceration, many citizens returning to communities are unable to obtain sustainable wage employment (Looney & Turner, 2018; Ring & Gill, 2017). The inability to obtain sustainable wages may jeopardize the achievement of well-being for this population and contribute to hardships for their families and communities (Davis et al., 2013; Duwe, 2017).

Duwe (2018) illuminated the importance of institutional and community programming for helping formerly incarcerated citizens find employment after prison. However, there appears to be a gap in research providing knowledge about how, if at all, formerly incarcerated citizens have used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment (Ives, 2016; Richmond, 2014; Weisburd et al., 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe and compare the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens to gain knowledge about how, if at all, they used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. Existing literature provided the basis for understanding the relationship between before and after release vocational service opportunities for incarcerated citizens and increasing community reentry success (Davis et al., 2014; Duwe, 2015; Harley, 2018). However, I found limited research regarding consumer perspectives on the

existing vocational services in correctional facilities across the United States. This knowledge gap was consistent with the findings in Taxman et al. (2014) and Smith (2016), whose studies demonstrated that transitional services before and after release from incarceration are lacking.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

RQ: How, if at all, have formerly incarcerated citizens used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment?

Theoretical Framework

Rogers's (1946) person-centered philosophy and Holland's (1959) theory of career choice framed this study. These theories highlight the innate strength of human beings and the human capacity for change (Holland, 1973; Rogers, 1946). I explain these theories in greater detail in Chapter 2. Rogers (1946) posited that people have a strong drive to become independent, socially adjusted, and productive. Additionally, Rogers theorized that people gain personal strength to achieve self-fulfillment through painful life experiences, such as incarceration. I applied Holland's (1959) theory to examining formerly incarcerated citizens' use of personal interests, aptitudes, and workplace values when seeking employment and developing a sustainable career after release. Together, these theories allowed a view of how formerly incarcerated citizens may have used their strengths, with or without vocational services, to obtain sustainable wage employment (Holland, 1973; Rogers, 1951). In this study, through a lens associated with these

theories, I explored the services and processes used by formerly incarcerated citizens who obtained sustainable wage employment.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative multiple case study approach (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) to describe the perceptions and experiences of six diverse individuals who obtained sustainable wage employment after incarceration. I portrayed each individual's perceptions and experiences as a distinct case in this study (Yin, 2018). The individuals in each case may or may not have had opportunities for vocational or transitional services provided by a correctional system or the communities to which they returned. Individuals who had vocational services opportunities may or may not have found specific programs useful for finding and maintaining sustainable wage employment. I purposefully selected study participants to obtain diversity among gender, ethnicity, age, geographical location, type of correctional facilities in which time was served, and type of residential community after incarceration (e.g., rural, suburban, or urban) among the cases (see Yin, 2018). Comparing the perceptions and experiences of multiple cases involving diverse circumstances allowed me to achieve my study's purpose (see Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018): to gain knowledge about how, if at all, formerly incarcerated people used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment.

Yin (2018) suggested that compiling multiple cases may strengthen qualitative case study results by exposing the patterns within and between them to increase the findings' validity. In this study, I described and compared various examples of the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated people who obtained employment,

attempting to expose patterns within and between the cases. Yin added that individual cases might support or oppose the conclusions that a researcher draws from the others. Studying the similarities and differences between the different cases may provide information to help understand the broader social processes and context-related personal decisions (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) involved in obtaining sustainable wage employment after incarceration.

I conducted semistructured telephone interviews to collect in-depth data about participants' perceptions and experiences (see Yang et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). I also investigated program websites and related archival material, such as publicly available correctional system vocational and transitional program literature, as an additional data source to verify the case participants' subjective reports (see Yin, 2018). I used content and thematic analysis to compare the commonalities and differences among case data. I coded, mapped, and described patterns, categories, and themes (see Yang et al., 2018; Yin, 2018) related to in-custody vocational opportunities, community services, and the process participants used to obtain sustainable employment after release.

Definitions

In this section, I provide the meanings I wished to convey for terms used in this study that may have multiple connotations or the potential to be misunderstood.

Collateral benefits: Positive gains for society when formerly incarcerated citizens obtain employment contributing to individual, family, and community well-being (Miller, 2014). For example, people may abide by laws, paid taxes to improve their family and community health and living situations, and improved decision making to become

prosocial mentors for their children and neighbors (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Hall et al., 2016; Harding et al., 2018).

Congruence/congruent work environments: The degree of person-job-work environment fit (Holland, 1959). Holland (1959) theorized that the degree of fit between an individual's personality and job and work environment, or congruence, is vital for job satisfaction, optimal performance, personal growth, and stability.

Correctional programs: Supervised programs and services designed to help criminal offenders change patterns of thinking, behaviors, and reactions to stress that has resulted in crime (Duwe, 2017). Correctional programs may have been prison-based, helping people prepare for release, or community-based, helping people transition back to society after prison (Duwe, 2017).

Employability: Having personal qualities and abilities to gain and maintain employment (Cerda et al., 2015; De Battisti et al., 2016). Personal qualities valued by employers may include integrity, reliability, ability to follow instructions, respect for others, regard for safety, academic and social skills, and an ability to make rational decisions (Cerda et al., 2015; De Battisti et al., 2016).

Incapacitation: The act of incarcerating criminal offenders to separate them from society and restrict their ability to commit more crimes. Hubbard (2015) and Stefanovska (2018) discussed incapacitation as one of the goals of incarceration. Incapacitation may have resulted in negative collateral consequences for society by impeding people's ability to be self-sufficient, work and pay taxes, provide for families, and use personal strengths to contribute to communities (Hubbard, 2015; Stefanovska, 2018).

Occupational predisposition: A personal tendency toward specific work (Holland, 1959). Holland (1959) theorized that people's backgrounds, including genetics, role models in youth, educational and learning histories, living experiences, and individual developmental factors, may have contributed to selecting certain occupation types.

Program fidelity: The execution of core correctional practices and protocols as they were designed (Haas & Spence, 2017). According to Haas and Spence (2017), available research lacks information about user perceptions of the quality of correctional services and fails to provide a complete understanding of the effectiveness of in-prison or postrelease correctional programs (Haas & Spence, 2017).

Strengths-based theories: Theories that emphasize nurturing each person's existing positive qualities to encourage self-efficacy, self-actualization, and increasing prosocial purpose (Barnao, Ward, & Robertson, 2016; Holland, 1959; Hunter et al., 2016; Rogers, 1946). Rogers (1946) and Holland (1959) proposed that focusing on strengths may encourage self-determination that transcends the challenges caused by individual personal deficits, hardships, and social structures (Barnao, Ward, & Robertson; Hunter et al., 2016).

Sustainable wage employment: Promotes economic stability and opportunities to enjoy and improve people's lives by paying higher than minimum wages with health insurance benefits (Nadeau & Glasmeier, 2018; NELP, 2016; Schwartz, 2015). Sustainable wage employment may contribute to autonomy and well-being after prison (NELP, 2016).

Technical violations: Breaking the rules of probation or parole, such as using substances, missing a curfew, or not checking in on a schedule. Technical violations are typically classified as recidivism and often result in reincarceration (Harding et al., 2018). Harding et al. (2018) assessed that it is not committing new crimes but rather technical violations that are the most common recidivism type and the most common reason for reincarceration.

Technology skills: Having adequate knowledge and experience to use the range of electronic devices standard in free citizens' lives that are often necessary for employment (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Examples include using computers for email, word processing, taking courses, uploading resumes or applying for jobs online, using map and direction software, communicating with cell phones and smartphones, and having an aptitude for mastering job-specific technology (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Vocational services: In-prison or postrelease community programs offering vocational rehabilitation, occupational interest assessment, career counseling, job skills training, work therapy, job search instruction, resume writing, job placement, job coaching, continuing education, credentialing or certification, etc. (Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections, 2016; Ring & Gill, 2017).

Assumptions

It was necessary to make a few assumptions in planning this research. I made a prevailing assumption that a small sample of individual cases across the United States could provide an understanding of how people have used vocational services to obtain

employment (see Yin, 2018). Similarly, I assumed a small sample of cases had the potential to add useful information to the research base (see Yin, 2018). I assumed that self-reporting participants would respond truthfully to qualifying questions (see Yin, 2018). As a case study in which data came from qualitative interviews, I assumed the participants' subjective perceptions and experiences, based on memory recall, were true (see Yin, 2018). I also assumed that participants might have had exposure to vocational services during or after incarceration that they recognized as elements in their employment process. Additionally, I assumed that formerly incarcerated citizens who found employment after prison did not rely entirely on family, friends, or luck but instead could identify personal strengths they used in the process (see Barnao, Ward, & Casey). Finally, I assumed that I could consciously maintain awareness of my personal biases to minimize the influence of my preconceived notions on research results (see Yin, 2018).

Scope and Delimitations

My research question outlined the scope of this study. I sought to learn how a sample of formerly incarcerated citizens who obtained sustainable wage employment after incarceration used vocational services if they did. Geography and context delimited each case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Specifically, selection criteria required that formerly incarcerated citizens who participated in my study had served at least 1 year in a correctional facility, returned to a U.S. community after incarceration, and obtained employment each felt paid a sustainable wage.

The results of my study have limited potential for transferability. First, each participant's circumstances, experiences, and perceptions were unique. I identified the

similarities and differences between the cases to align with my study's purpose (Yin, 2018). Secondly, each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the federal prison system provide different budgeting and vocational services for programs in correctional facilities (Ring & Gill, 2017). The cases' similarities and differences have provided additional knowledge in this subject area (Yin, 2018). Thirdly, the communities to which people returned from incarceration across the United States offered diverse levels of postrelease services, reentry support, and employment opportunities (Ring & Gill, 2017). Nevertheless, my study design may be useful in the future as a guide for exploring similar topics. Additionally, the experiences shared by study participants about their pathways to sustainable wage employment after incarceration might be valuable information for formerly incarcerated citizens across the country.

Limitations

This study's limitations included weaknesses typical of qualitative case study research, such as trustworthiness, generalizability, and bias (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Gathering and analyzing the considerable amount of data collected through in-depth interviews was time-consuming and prevented conducting a large-scale study (Stake 1995; Yin, 2018). A single researcher and small sample size pose a concern for trustworthiness (Stake 1995; Yin, 2018). However, the small sample and specific context were purposefully selected for their potential to provide useful information for formerly incarcerated citizens, vocational services program administrators, and future research (see Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I used a purposeful, maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling strategy (see Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995) to manage possible sampling bias. I

attempted to recruit participants of both genders, varying adult ages, races, ethnicities, and the diverse geographical and economic regions of the United States (see Yin, 2018).

Researcher-interpreted, in-depth description of subjective human truths also limits trustworthiness and generalizability (Yin, 2018). Specifically, the personal reports of what constitutes sustainable wage employment, the diverse experiences in the process of obtaining employment, and individual perceptions of vocational services opportunities that I gathered as data were unique for each case. It was not my intention that the same data could be replicated or repeated in any future study (see Yin, 2018). Neither were the results of this multiple case study intended to represent the processes used by all formerly incarcerated citizens to obtain employment.

Additionally, gathering data through qualitative interviews could have resulted in the misrepresentation of data due to researcher bias, emotions, or participant reporting errors (Korstjens & Moser, 2018b; Yin, 2018). To reduce the effects of researcher bias and the distortion of data, I incorporated a plan for transparency in my data collection, analysis, and reporting phases (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018b; Yin, 2018). This plan included using journaling and bracketing practices to monitor any researcher bias (see Levitt et al., 2017) and providing audio recordings and written transcriptions of participants' responses to my dissertation committee chairperson (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018b). Additionally, I used probing questions during interviews to clarify information and asked participants to review written transcriptions before reporting data. Finally, I compared data collected in the interviews with other sources (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018b).

Significance

This case study provided an original contribution to a research base that lacked knowledge about how, if at all, formerly incarcerated citizens have used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. My research may be useful for professionals in many fields, including criminal justice, correctional programming, workforce and career development, human and social services, community partnerships, and social policy. My work may inspire social change by providing knowledge to help guide correctional and community program professionals toward developing and improving vocational services for people sentenced to periods of incarceration. It may also inspire new and advanced research related to supporting formerly incarcerated citizens in their quests to obtain sustainable wage employment in their communities. Knowledge gained about the vocational services and employment experiences people had during and after incarceration may help improve reentry outcomes for this population in the future and may ultimately contribute to American communities' wellness.

Summary

Researchers have determined that as many as 75% of citizens who return to communities after incarceration remain unemployed 1 year after release (Johnson & Cullen, 2015). Many of these formerly incarcerated citizens lack the education and workforce skills required to obtain sustainable work (Davis et al., 2013). If people cannot obtain sustainable wage employment, they may become a burden for their families and society or return to criminal behaviors (Barnao, Ward, & Casey, 2016; Western et al., 2015). Existing research describes the possible adverse reentry outcomes, social barriers,

and common personal deficits faced by this population (Barnao, Ward, & Casey, 2016; Barnao, Ward, & Robertson, 2016; Rukus et al., 2016; Western et al., 2015). However, there is little information in the research literature about the services and processes used by people who do obtain sustainable wage employment after incarceration that may contribute to individual, family, and community well-being (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Haas & Spence, 2017).

In this chapter, I introduced my study's problem, purpose, and research question. I provided a brief description of formerly incarcerated citizens and their employment experiences, as viewed through a strengths-based theoretical lens. Through a strengths-based view of this research phenomenon I provided examples of how formerly incarcerated people may have obtained employment despite the known problems and barriers to reentry. I introduced my rationale for using a qualitative multiple case study to learn how, if at all, formerly incarcerated citizens use vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. I defined terms that I used in my research to clarify the meanings I wished to convey. I discussed my study's scope, the assumptions I made to perform my research, and identified research design weaknesses. Finally, I remarked on my research's significance; my findings may contribute to an enhanced understanding of how some people obtain sustainable employment to achieve well-being after incarceration.

In Chapter 2, I review research literature related to my strength-based theoretical framework. I applied this framework to studying diverse individuals' perceptions and pathways to obtaining sustainable wage employment after incarceration.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe and compare the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens to gain knowledge about how, if at all, they used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. One of the common barriers to community reintegration evidenced in current literature is formerly incarcerated citizens' inability to find work that contributes to the achievement of autonomy and well-being (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; Harding et al., 2018; Looney & Turner, 2018; Samele et al., 2018). According to researchers, it is common for people who have been incarcerated to have long gaps in employment experience and limited vocational training opportunities or career guidance while serving time (Rukus et al., 2016; Western et al., 2015). Scholars support the importance of providing both in-custody vocational programs and transitional services in communities to improve reentry success (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; Davis et al., 2013; Looney & Turner, 2018; NELP, 2016). However, according to Butts and Schiraldi (2018), Smith (2016), and Yelowitz and Bollinger (2016), funding for many correctional system vocational programs was removed during federal and state budget reductions in the 1980s, creating a long gap in the development, implementation, and evaluation of employment-related training, education, and guidance programs during and after prison.

In this chapter, I provide support for selecting a strengths-based theoretical lens through which to view formerly incarcerated citizens' perceptions and experiences about opportunities for vocational services and obtaining sustainable wage employment after

incarceration. Using Roger's (1946) person-centered counseling theory and Holland's (1959) theory of career choice, I framed my study to focus not on people's challenges, but on the processes used by individuals who obtained employment that supported their achievement of autonomy and well-being. I then discuss literature that supports my selection of research methodology, a descriptive multiple case study of the perceptions and experiences of individual citizens who obtained sustainable wage employment after incarceration. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a summary of the major themes I identified in the existing literature and a description of how my research has the potential to build on existing knowledge.

Literature Search Strategy

I used the Walden University Library, Google Scholar, the Prison Policy Initiative Research Library, and internet searches as my primary strategy for locating literature. I searched for literature using the databases Criminal Justice, Education, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Criminal Justice, Sage Premier, Social Science, Sociology, SocINDEX, Dissertations and Theses at Walden, and ProQuest Dissertations.

I began my search using topic-related keywords to find full text, peer-reviewed articles in the Walden University Library. Making exceptions for seminal research articles that laid the groundwork for more recent publications and offered significant insight for my study, I limited my search results to 2014 publications and later. By doing so, I sought to establish a place for my research among recent contributions to the field of study and provide a new perspective. I searched with the following keywords and

phrases, singularly and in combinations: *case study, collateral benefits, correctional vocational programs, desistance, incarceration, labor market, living wage, employability, employment, evidence-based practices, ex-offender, Holland theory of career choice, prison, prison industries, public opinion, qualitative case study, recidivism, reentry, returned citizen, Rogers person-centered counseling, sustainable wage employment, transitional employment, vocational rehabilitation***,** *work-release,* and *work therapy.*

Theoretical Framework

Two theories guided this research to understand how formerly incarcerated citizens develop their employment-related strengths, potential, and desires to become self-supporting, law-abiding, citizens. I used Rogers's (1946) person-centered counseling theory (also known as person-centered theory) and Holland's (1959) theory of vocational personalities and work environments (also known as the theory of career choice) together as a theoretical framework. These two theories collectively provided a lens through which I viewed people's abilities to self-direct personal change and growth, despite challenges, to obtain employment and well-being (Rogers, 1946; Holland, 1959). In recent research, Barnao, Ward, & Casey (2016) and Hunter et al. (2016) performed studies on the value of a contemporary strengths-based criminal offender rehabilitation model designed to equip citizens with the resources necessary to achieve well-being after prison. These researchers studied strengths-based correctional interventions to help people identify and build on personal assets to promote positive change (Barnao, Ward, & Casey, 2016; Hunter et al., 2016). Strengths-based theories emphasize nurturing each person's existing positive qualities to encourage self-efficacy and increase prosocial

purpose (Apel & Horney, 2017; Barnao, Ward, & Casey, 2016; Hunter et al., 2016). Focusing on strengths, in turn, as proposed by Rogers (1946) and Holland (1959), may encourage self-determination that transcends the challenges caused by individual deficits, hardships in life, and social structures (Apel & Horney, 2017; Barnao, Ward, & Casey, 2016; Hunter et al., 2016).

Rogers's Person-Centered Counseling Theory

Rogers (1946) developed person-centered counseling theory to conceptualize the process of personal growth and constructive change that people may use to overcome life's hardships and achieve well-being (Rogers, 1946, 1951). Rogers used the term *person* rather than *patient* deliberately (Rogers, 1946). He believed it was important for counselors to steer away from conceptions that people who seek counseling are sick or that a therapist can provide a cure for personal problems (Rogers, 1946; Shefer et al., 2018). Rogers (1946, 1951, 1957, 1961) proposed that human beings continually learn, grow, and change. Rogers also posited that people have an inherent desire to develop to their fullest potential or *self-actualize*. Additionally, although experiences may either encourage or stifle individual growth, Rogers believed that most people can perform the cognitive reasoning necessary to direct behavioral choices and strive for personal potential, even after experiencing trauma or hardship (Rogers, 1961; Shefer et al., 2018).

Instead of focusing on people's problems or hardships in life, Rogers's (1946) person-centered theory promotes people's taking charge of their own lives, identifying individual potential to overcome challenges, and seeking assistance for reaching higher goals (Proctor et al., 2016; Rogers, 1946, 1951). Barnao, Ward, & Robertson (2016),

Dumas and Ward (2016), Hunter et al. (2016), and Proctor et al. (2016) performed studies providing evidence that Rogers's person-centered theory is useful for guiding formerly incarcerated citizens toward achieving independence and well-being.

According to Stefanovska (2018), one of the goals of incarceration as a punishment for committing a crime is *rehabilitation* (learning to live a different way). Improvement of personal circumstances, self-improvement, or taking steps toward self-actualization are common goals for rehabilitation (Rogers, 1961; Stefanovska, 2018). However, Hubbard (2015) and Stefanovska (2018) discuss *incapacitation* (separating people from society to restrict their ability to commit more crime) as the second goal of incarceration. Hubbard (2015) and Stefanovska (2018) explained that incapacitation impedes people's ability to be self-sufficient, work and pay taxes, provide for families, and use personal strengths to contribute to communities. In their studies, these researchers reported that people who are incapacitated by incarceration have little freedom to practice self-direction, to take responsibility for personal choices, or to reason through a decision-making process for themselves over time (Hubbard, 2015; Stefanovska, 2018). Incapacitation often creates negative collateral consequences for prisoners' families and communities (Hubbard, 2015; Stefanovska, 2018).

Rogers's (1946) theory encourages people to discover for themselves constructive life goals that may lead to self-fulfillment. In their research, Dumas and Ward (2016) summarize the use of strengths-based models for criminal offender rehabilitation. These researchers help envision criminal offenders, like the general population, as people capable of taking charge of the personal process of change and growth and ultimately

living meaningful, personally satisfying lives. Yelowitz and Bollinger (2015) also explained the relevance of person-centered theory applied to formerly incarcerated citizens obtaining sustainable wage employment. These researchers found that vocational rehabilitation may help people reentering communities from incarceration retake responsibility for building and managing their lives for themselves (Yelowitz & Bollinger, 2015).

Holland's Theory of Career Choice

Holland (1959) proposed that people's vocational and career interests are a form of expressing individual personalities. Holland added that people are more likely to develop meaningful, purposeful careers if they can identify employment-related personal qualities and strengths (Gottfredson et al., 1974; Nauta, 2010). Holland's theory highlights what individuals can do, what activities are personally rewarding, what each person values in a work environment, and what occupations may be a good match (Gottfredson et al., 1974). The theory does not focus on people's deficits or past problems with employment (Gottfredson et al., 1974; Nauta, 2010). In an overview of Holland's (1959) theory, Nauta (2010) highlighted the practicality of applying the theory across populations and around the world. Additionally, Nauta illustrated the theory's user-friendliness and observed testability in research over decades of social, technical, and occupational advancements.

Like Rogers's (1946) person-centered theory, the focus of Holland's (1959) career theory is helping people discover personal strengths and values to better themselves and improve their lives (Gottfredson et al., 1974). Holland's theory

approaches self and life improvement by finding a good fit for a career that encourages a purposeful, economically stable life (Holland, 1973, 1987). Holland theorized that the degree of fit between an individual's personality and the work environment, or congruence, is vital for job satisfaction, optimal performance, and personal growth and stability (Holland, 1973). Fundamental to the theory is the belief that people's backgrounds, including genetics, role models in youth, educational and learning histories, living experiences, and individual developmental factors contribute to the personal selection of certain occupation types. Holland called this highly individualized tendency toward specific work *occupational predisposition* (Holland, 1973). Holland (1959, 1973, 1987) theorized that occupational predisposition strongly influences person and career congruence.

Theoretically, according to Holland (1959), because of occupational predisposition, people prefer *congruent work environments* (matching personalities and lifestyles), and specific workplace conditions attract fitting employees. As his theory developed, Holland (1973) added the importance of recognizing that people change with work and life experiences and occupations change with economic and technological development (Gottfredson & Johnstun, 2009; Holland et al., 1967; Holland, 1973). These personal and work changes may bring about changes in occupational choices and degrees of congruence (person/job fit) that alter some people's career paths (Gottfredson & Johnstun, 2009; Holland et al., 1967).

Furthermore, according to Derzis et al. (2017) and Harding et al. (2018), incarceration may be an experience that changes congruence and occupational

predisposition. Derzis et al. found that people preparing to reenter society from prison often have unrealistic ideas about their ability to return to occupations they once held or their suitability for other potential careers. These researchers also discovered that incarcerated offenders might have little understanding of their employment-related aptitudes, basic career development requirements, or how their interests and values relate to career potential. Expanding on this idea, Harding et al. (2018) explained that incarceration and separation from society for many years could negatively alter people's employment aptitudes and competitive potential. The experience of incarceration can contribute to a change in people's thought processes and behaviors that affect employability (Harding et al., 2018). Additionally, procedures and technology used in various occupations may change over a term of incarceration (Harding et al., 2018).

Harding et al. (2018) and Shippen et al. (2017) argued that federal and state policies could prevent formerly incarcerated citizens convicted of certain crimes from being employed in some occupations, despite their abilities, experience, and interest. Examples of this are policies that forbid illicit drug offenders from obtaining licenses in the healthcare fields or sex offenders from working near children (Harding et al., 2018; Shippen et al., 2017). Shippen et al. found that inmates often reported interest in finding jobs after release in the same occupations they held before prison, even if they anticipated problems with their abilities or qualifications. However, Harding et al. (2018) concluded that formerly incarcerated citizens convicted of certain offenses might be forced to change career goals after prison.

Formerly Incarcerated Citizens and Employment After Prison

The research on prisoner reentry supports that formerly incarcerated citizens' autonomy and well-being are generally linked to their abilities to obtain sustainable wage employment (Couloute & Kopf, 2018; Looney & Turner, 2018; NELP, 2016). In a seminal, comprehensive longitudinal study, Visher et al. (2008) found that formerly incarcerated citizens who were employed were less likely to return to prison within the first year after release. Additionally, the higher the wages, the less likely the men would return to crime (Visher et al., 2008). However, Couloute and Kopf (2018) provided statistical evidence that formerly incarcerated citizens in the U.S. are unemployed at a rate more than five times greater than the general population's unemployment rate. The results from both the Couloute and Kopf (2018) and the NELP (2016) studies indicated that most people returning from incarceration actively seek employment and want to work. However, Visher et al. (2018) and Looney and Turner (2018) found that most of these citizens must rely on family and friends to support them in the first year after prison. Moreover, the researchers noted the median income for those who obtain employment within the first year after incarceration was well below the established single-person federal poverty level (Looney &Turner, 2018; NELP, 2016).

In their research report, Couloute and Kopf (2018) propose that this extensive exclusion of formerly incarcerated citizens from the workforce may contribute to individual failure to achieve self-sufficiency and high recidivism rates. In turn, the researchers suggest that high unemployment among this population also contributes to community economic instability and high crime (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). The NELP

(2016) researchers illustrated the relationship between employment and formerly incarcerated citizens' abilities to support and provide for their families. NELP researchers pointed out that jobs providing sustainable wages and benefits promote economic stability and improve people's lives (NELP, 2016).

Furthermore, Schwartz (2015) reported that employment is essential both as a source of income and to provide necessary opportunities that lead to life satisfaction. Paralleling this notion, Blustein et al. (2013) found that people are better equipped to manage a crisis of unemployment and obtain work if they have financial resources, higher education levels, family support, and adaptive coping skills. Blustein et al. further explained that not having purposeful work may contribute to some people's use of drugs and alcohol to deal with inadequacy and failure feelings. These researchers found that people who had fewer socioeconomic assets or had health problems were less able to cope with unemployment challenges and manifested feelings of frustration, depression, and despair (Blustein et al., 2013). Other researchers have provided evidence that people who return to society from incarceration often have health problems, few socioeconomic assets, and related frustration, depression, and despair (Harley, 2014; Samele et al., 2018; Western et al., 2015).

For formerly incarcerated citizens seeking employment after prison, the combination of lower levels of personal aptitudes and lower levels of external support of a prosocial lifestyle may be a shared problem (Harley, 2014; Western et al., 2015). Harley (2014), Morenoff and Harding (2014), and Western et al. (2015) found common challenges to obtaining employment among criminal offenders. These researchers found

that common challenges for the formerly incarcerated included personal deficits like mental health or substance use problems and external barriers to employment such as social stigma (Harley, 2014; Morenoff & Harding, 2014; Western et al., 2015). The researchers added that these barriers to employment for citizens returning from incarceration often result in hardships such as homelessness, poor nutrition and health, and low quality of life (Harley, 2014; Morenoff & Harding, 2014; Western et al., 2015).

Duwe (2018), Looney and Turner (2018), and Harding et al. (2018) contributed additional knowledge to research on employment after prison by illustrating that educational, training, and employment deficits often begin before criminal offenders are sentenced to incarceration. Duwe (2018) revealed that full-time work during the year before entering prison might be the strongest predictor of formerly incarcerated citizens' abilities to obtain employment after release. Studies have consistently found that even among formerly incarcerated citizens who do find a job after prison, many are challenged to achieve consistent, full-time, sustainable wage employment that encourages autonomy, stability, and well-being (Duwe, 2018; Harding et al., 2018; Looney & Turner, 2018).

Sustainable Wage, Meaningful Employment

Acquiring a job that pays sustainable wages to cover the cost of living and debts may influence people's abilities to desist from crime (Harding et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Western et al., 2015). A common argument among researchers is that obtaining employment with high enough income to meet financial obligations is one of the most difficult challenges formerly incarcerated citizens face when reentering communities from prison (Barnes-Proby et al., 2014; Fredericksen & Omli, 2016; Western et al., 2015;

Young, 2014). To measure this phenomenon, Glasmeier (2018) developed a tool to calculate a monetary figure known as a *living wage* or an estimated minimum wage a person must earn at work to pay the necessary expenses to live in a particular area. Glasmeier's calculation of a living wage included only essentials for living. It did not include money needed to cover out of the ordinary needs, emergencies, or extra wishes for improving quality of life (Nadeau & Glasmeier, 2018). A living wage calculation using the tool does not, therefore, include income necessary for paying crime-related debt, past child support, student loans, health, auto, or home insurance, or to save for retirement (Martin et al., 2017; Western et al., 2015; Young, 2014). People, whether returning to communities from prison or in the general population, may seek to earn wages higher than their calculated living wage to afford to purchase more than essentials for living, to save money, or to invest in their futures (Fredericksen, & Omli, 2016; Nadeau & Glasmeier, 2018).

Apel and Horney (2017) and Cantora (2015) provided evidence that people also seek work that is personally meaningful to gain and maintain a sense of purpose and substantiate that what they do in life has value. Cantora (2015) noted that a common requirement of *halfway houses* (supervised residences through which some formerly incarcerated citizens process as a transitional step toward freedom) is for residents to find a job within 30 days of prison release. Cantora explained that this protocol often forces formerly incarcerated citizens to accept low-paying and unfulfilling work. In the Cantora study, 64% of the employed women who found employment identified their work as low-

skill, low-paying, and unsatisfying. According to Cantora, this requirement contradicted the workers' desires to find jobs that could help them develop fulfilling careers.

Similarly, Apel and Horney (2017) discovered that job commitment (a subjective measure of the quality of work represented by a feeling of positive significance when performing well) was more important than receiving pay for their study's participants. Apel and Horney also found that participants who viewed their work as meaningful were less likely to engage in criminal behavior. The researchers found that hours and income, which are the most common objective measures of quality of work in existing research, were not associated with reduced crime among their sample (Apel & Horney, 2017). Their study results demonstrated that both low-commitment employment and unemployment coincided with higher levels of criminal behavior. Conversely, according to Apel and Horney, work commitment was strongly and consistently correlated with desistance from crime (Apel & Horney, 2017).

Desistance and Recidivism

Illegal activities in which formerly incarcerated citizens may engage after prison can involve *technical violations* (breaking the rules of probation or parole) or committing new crimes (Burt, 2014; Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Harding et al., 2018). Technical violations such as using substances or missing a curfew are typically classified as *recidivism* (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Harding et al., 2018). Harding et al. (2018) assessed that technical violations, not new crimes, are the most common cause of recidivism. These researchers emphasized that incapacitation by incarceration can disrupt people's abilities to meet society's expectations if released without resources to meet their needs

(Burt, 2014; Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Harding et al., 2018). Consequently, formerly incarcerated citizens who cannot find sustainable wage employment may have decreased opportunities to achieve well-being with an increased probability for future incarceration (Burt, 2014; Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Harding et al., 2018).

Burt (2014) and other researchers focus on identifying programs that help reduce recidivism. However, more recent research by Hall et al. (2016), Harding et al. (2018), and Butts and Schiraldi (2018) recommended closer scrutiny of how correctional services may help people make progress toward reentry success, whether or not they recidivate. According to Butts and Schiraldi (2018), whether a person recidivates or not is an inaccurate gauge for measuring the often positive, varied, and complex social adjustments that people do make, over time, as individuals reintegrate into diverse communities after prison. Furthermore, according to Butts and Schiraldi (2018), Dumas and Ward (2016), and Yelowitz and Bollinger (2015), when people change for the better, there are *collateral benefits* (positive gains for society as a result of individual improvement). As an alternative to tallying recidivism, according to these researchers, it may be more valuable to provide decision-makers with information about how many people have achieved autonomy and well-being and how they achieved those goals. These researchers suggest future studies should focus on individual and social factors that encourage *desistance* (the avoidance of antisocial or criminal behaviors).

Butts and Schiraldi (2018), Hall et al. (2016), and Harding et al. (2018) concluded that the practice of measuring reentry failure rates by recidivism inhibits decision-makers' abilities to see people's success and the collateral benefits of correctional

programming for families and communities. These researchers concluded that program evaluations relying on recidivism rates instead of how people succeed could distort decision-makers' and public perceptions of formerly incarcerated citizens' efforts to live prosocially (Harding et al., 2018). Each of these studies provides insight on how vocational and other rehabilitation services have helped people who committed crimes improve their lives, improve decision making, and support individual strengths and positive change (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Hall et al., 2016; Harding et al., 2018).

Well-Being After Incarceration

Targeting strengths and nurturing individual assets may be vital to overcoming personal deficits and external barriers to achieving life goals, according to Rogers (1946), Holland (1959), and recent studies by Barnao, Ward, & Casey (2016), Barnao, Ward, & Robertson (2016), and Shefer et al. (2018). Barnao, Ward, & Casey (2016) specifically highlighted that integrating strengths-based interventions in correctional rehabilitation programming may encourage increased prisoner engagement and, in turn, help people desist from crime. Shefer et al. (2018) looked through the lens of person-centered theory (Rogers, 1946) at improving workforce relationships across broad-spectrum American industry by promoting individual strengths and positive regard for others. Shefer et al. concluded that in any workplace, refocusing away from workers' problems and deficits to highlight workers' strengths and potential can be a means for tapping human resources that help increase worker vitality, organizational citizenship, and job performance.

Employment and Social Inclusion

Stigma refers to negative regard for people or social attitudes that discredit people (Goffman, 1963; Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018). Stigma contradicts Roger's (1946) notion that positive regard for others is essential for well-being. Stigma may result in adverse differential treatment of groups of people based on socially undesirable attributes (Goffman, 1963; Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018). For people who have a criminal record, stigma often manifests as prejudice and suspicion resulting from stereotypes portraying people as tainted by one or more bad personal choices, problems, or life experiences (Jones Young & Powell, 2015). People stigmatized by a criminal record may be labeled in society as criminals or felons, based on past behaviors, for many years after completing legal requirements (Rade et al., 2018). They may also internalize an adverse social identity projected from society (Goffman, 1963; Jones Young & Powell, 2015). This sometimes-internalized identity may be difficult to hide when seeking employment (Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018). Social stigma may negatively impact formerly incarcerated citizens' abilities to obtain work or achieve well-being (Goffman, 1963; Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018).

Rogers's (1946) person-centered theory and Holland's (1959) career theory incorporate the concepts of acceptance by others and feelings of inclusion and positive self-worth as essential components of well-being. Some researchers have suggested that learning more about formerly incarcerated citizens' perceptions and experiences may provide insight for developing a process of de-stigmatization in communities (Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018). These researchers believe de-stigmatization

efforts in society could help reduce this barrier to employment and increase well-being for formerly incarcerated citizens and communities (Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018). Novo-Corti and Barreiro-Gen (2015) analyzed qualitative interviews. They found that formerly incarcerated citizens commonly identified employment as an opportunity to feel social acceptance and well-being instead of isolation and poverty. Jones Young & Powell (2015), Novo-Corti and Barreiro-Gen (2015), and Rade, Desmarais, and Burnette (2018) emphasized the importance of family and social support for formerly incarcerated citizens' abilities to overcome the common challenges of community reintegration.

Halkovic and Greene (2015) and Rade et al. (2018) highlighted research findings showing that people who have had the opportunity for interpersonal contact with criminal offenders have more positive attitudes toward them and their potential for rehabilitation and prosocial living. Rade et al. specifically suggest that intervention programs involving an interpersonal connection between formerly incarcerated citizens, employers, and the public can be beneficial. Halkovic and Greene (2015) explored social stigma and analyzed previously incarcerated college students' experiences and perceptions. The researchers' purpose was to challenge the stereotype that people who have served time for crime are a security threat on college campuses (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). The researchers found that formerly incarcerated students might enrich their academic and civic communities instead of being a security threat. According to Halkovic and Greene, formerly incarcerated students can share first-hand knowledge about how the legal and

social services systems help connect the college community with underserved populations (Halkovic & Greene, 2015).

Educational Attainment

Couloute (2018) determined that more than one-quarter of formerly incarcerated citizens do not have a high school diploma or GED and that this figure represents more than double the number of adults in the general population without one basic educational credentials. Couloute (2018) and Morenoff and Harding (2014) discussed the challenges formerly incarcerated citizens may have as job seekers in a workforce that increasingly demands higher credentialing and higher levels of technical skill. These researchers added knowledge to the literature about the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and the cycle of poverty, crime, incarceration, and recidivism (Couloute, 2018; Morenoff & Harding, 2014).

Couloute (2018) and Morenoff and Harding (2014) emphasized that educational disadvantage begins well before prison and, without intervention, may persist as a problem that stifles personal growth and the achievement of well-being (Couloute, 2018; Morenoff & Harding, 2014). These researchers described a vicious cycle that affects already disadvantaged people and communities at a higher degree than communities of average or above socioeconomic levels. A highlighted finding in the Morenoff and Harding study was: In poor neighborhoods, there are almost as many adults involved in the criminal justice system as in the workforce or school. The researchers concluded that, as economic resources become more strained, communities cannot support formerly incarcerated citizens. This lack of support may contribute to increased unemployment

rates and recidivism (Morenoff & Harding, 2014). Additionally, formerly incarcerated people who did not complete high school may have missed out on positive social experiences, such as interest group participation, role modeling, and career guidance (Couloute, 2018).

Conclusively, researchers have found that continuing education opportunities provided during prison sentences help increase the likelihood of obtaining employment after prison (Davis et al., 2014; Delaney et al., 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2014). In separate large-scale studies, Davis et al. (2014) and Duwe and Clark (2014) concluded that formerly incarcerated citizens who engaged in academic or vocational programs while in prison were more likely to obtain employment and less likely to recidivate than those who did not participate. The researchers identified lacking education and technology skill programs as key reasons people struggled to find work after incarceration or returned to crime to meet their needs (Davis et al., 2014; Duwe & Clark, 2014). Additionally, Duwe and Clark found that obtaining college degrees in prison corresponded with significantly higher hourly wages, annual earnings, and lower recidivism rates among the people in their large samples. The researchers concluded that when people are qualified to work jobs that pay higher wages, they can support themselves, find satisfaction in pro-social living and less often return to crime (Duwe & Clark, 2014).

Ross et al. (2015) and Delaney et al. (2016) looked specifically at education as a strength for some prisoners that can be nurtured to encourage prosocial choices, continuing self-improvement, and well-being during and after prison. These researchers found that providing education, especially college-level programs for incarcerated

learners, can help strengthen individuals, families, and communities. Couloute (2018) added that it is impractical to expect all formerly incarcerated citizens to compete for employment in the present-day, highly skilled workforce without in-custody and post-release interventions. Ross et al. (2015) and Delaney et al. (2016) also proposed that college education for incarcerated people may benefit economically disadvantaged families and communities. One such benefit for families may be that children of formerly incarcerated citizens who have a college education are more likely to attend college themselves (Delaney et al., 2016). This proven collateral benefit may potentially interrupt the cycle of crime and incarceration that can continue through generations (Delaney et al., 2016; Ross, 2015. According to Delaney et al., college education in prison may promote well-being for communities.

Technology and Workforce Skills

Correctional facilities may fail to help citizens keep pace with the development and use of technology in society and the workforce (Chappell & Shippen, 2013; Davis et al., 2014; Ring & Gill, 2017; Yelowitz & Bollinger, 2015). Tolbert and Hudson (2015) assessed that correctional education programs lagged behind the general population's efforts to achieve the National Education Technology Plan's goals. This educational technology policy articulates a vision of equity and inclusion for all potential learners (Tolbert & Hudson, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The policy's goal is to make learning possible anytime, anywhere, and to support students regardless of background, age, language, or disabilities through active use of technology (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Specifically, the National Education Technology Plan

targets underprivileged and marginalized populations, such as incarcerated and released citizens (Tolbert & Hudson, 2015). The plan emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for all learners to develop skills necessary for success in the workforce and society (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Researchers have identified that not keeping current with advances in technology is a common barrier to sustainable wage employment for formerly incarcerated citizens (Davis et al., 2014; Ring & Gill, 2017; Tolbert & Hudson, 2015). Davis et al. (2014) surveyed technology use in correctional education and vocational training programs. The researchers concluded that correctional agency security policies limiting or preventing technology use in education programs severely hinder incarcerated people's preparation for reentry success (Davis et al., 2014). Ring and Gill (2017) found that only three percent of more than 2,000 federal prisoners interviewed in their study reported having computer access for educational or training purposes. Tolbert and Hudson (2015) identified opportunities and challenges to upgrading and expanding technology to educate and prepare incarcerated people for reentry to minimize negative collateral consequences.

Opportunities for Vocational Services

Most correctional systems in the U.S. offer some opportunities for vocational services (Duwe, 2017). However, as mentioned, not all people in prison or formerly incarcerated citizens have opportunities to participate in these programs before they are released (Duwe, 2017). Additionally, according to Haas and Spence (2017) and Ring and Gill (2017), researchers have paid little attention to the views of people who are or were incarcerated regarding the availability and quality of correctional programming.

Funding and Resources

The Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections (2016) investigated the effectiveness of rehabilitation programming in federal prisons and found *program fidelity* (the extent to which programs are delivered as designed) questionable due to inadequate funding and resources. The researchers reported that inefficient staffing levels had created program shortages and lengthy waitlists for most rehabilitative programs in federal prisons, especially vocational training programs that included general education. Smith (2016) reported similar circumstances within state prisons in Texas, identifying funding, staff, and program shortages that have resulted in the provision of vocational services for only 6% of the state's 156,000 prison inmates. Consistent with the Charles Colson Task Force (2016) and Smith (2016) findings related to program fidelity, Ring and Gill (2017) explored the existing rehabilitative and educational resources in the federal prison system from the perspective of users. The prisoners in their study reported that many vocational training programs had lengthy waitlists, were too short-term, were outdated, lacked quality, and were often instructed by peer inmates, underqualified staff, or volunteers (Ring & Gill, 2017).

Vocational Program Fidelity

Existing research indicates that fidelity of correctional vocational services is affected by the length of time people participate and whether programs are updated to match society's progress. Young (2014), the Charles Colson Task Force (2016), Duwe and Clark (2017), and Ring and Gill (2017) discussed lacking program fidelity for many in-custody vocational services that are not provided on the same level as training,

education, and career development programs that are valued in society. These researchers emphasized that formerly incarcerated citizens may remain at a disadvantage when competing for jobs in their communities until correctional programs are improved (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017; Young, 2014). Additionally, these researchers noted that, for prison vocational programming to effectively help people compete for sustainable jobs and in the American workforce, adopting the recommendations of labor economists and community employers will be essential (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017; Young, 2014). Specifically, these recommendations include that programs are long-term, in-depth, provide technical skills necessary for success, and focus on professional skills that make individuals sought after by employers (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017; Young, 2014).

Continuity of Services

According to the American Psychological Association (2017), to support people preparing to reenter communities from incarceration, employment-related programs must be long-term and provide *continuity of services* or programs that help people transition from incarceration to society. However, researchers have found few correctional employment programs that provided a planned continuum of services to help place individuals in sustainable wage jobs after incarceration (Barnes-Proby et al., 2014; Smith, 2016; Young, 2014). Barnes-Proby et al. (2014), Smith (2016), and Young (2014) also discussed the importance of continuity of services that help people physically and

psychologically connect in-custody learning and work experience with obtaining and maintaining employment in the free world.

Barnes-Proby et al. (2014) and Samele et al. (2018) provided information on two existing programs that offer transitional employment services for citizens returning to society. Consistent with the findings of the NELP (2016) mentioned earlier in this chapter, these researchers described how community partnerships that provided continuity of services enabled participants to support themselves and their families, develop resilience, and increase self-worth and well-being (Barnes-Proby et al., 2014; Samele et al., 2018).

Ideally, correctional work-release programs address common employment barriers by providing jobs, vocational experience, and opportunities to develop employability as citizens make the transition from incarceration to communities (Rukus et al., 2016). While work-release interventions vary by design, a link between a job worked while a person is incarcerated and employment after release is an essential program element (Cantora, 2015; Rukus et al., 2016; Visher et al., 2011). Cantora (2015) reported that work-release programs typically allow inmates to earn higher wages than in-custody jobs. These programs may also require workers to save money for their release and pay a fee to reimburse states for their confinement (Cantora, 2015). Additionally, Visher et al. (2011) note that some work-release and transitional employment programs provide formerly incarcerated citizens with a connection to employers in communities before release. These work-release elements may be essential for program fidelity (Haas & Spence, 2017; Visher et al., 2011).

Furthermore, Richmond (2014) illustrated that vocational training and employment inside correctional facilities might have many of the same benefits as employment in society. For instance, according to Richmond, some federal prison facilities offer *Prison Industries* work opportunities (Bureau of Prisons programs that provide diverse industrial skills training to federal prison inmates). Citizens who returned to society after participating in Prison Industries programs while incarcerated reported benefits such as a sense of purpose and self-worth, self-confidence, and self-determination (Richmond, 2014). However, from qualitative interviews, Richmond also discovered that some former Prison Industries program users perceived a lack of transferability of new skills and experience. A connection between work in prison and jobs in home communities was lacking.

Qualitative Multiple Case Study Methodology

I selected qualitative multiple case study as a research methodology based on my constructivist viewpoint and desire to understand how unique people perceive truth based on their environments and experiences (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) proposed that multiple case studies are appropriate for comparing separate units of analysis bound by context but not location. I defined my study cases as individuals who returned to diverse communities in the United States after incarceration and obtained what each considered sustainable wage employment. The experiences of having been incarcerated and earning sustainable wages after release bound the individual cases. Cases were selected from communities across the United States and not bound by location. Study participants may or may not have had opportunities for vocational and transitional

employment services provided by a correctional system or in their home communities after release.

Much of the existing research on reentry after incarceration focuses on individual deficits, social barriers to success, and recidivism rates. Few researchers have studied the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens who successfully reintegrated into their communities (Bender et al., 2016; Derzis et al., 2017; Hlavka et al., 2015; Miller, 2014). However, recent qualitative studies deduce that people preparing to reenter society from incarceration consider sustainable wage employment crucial for well-being (Bender et al., 2016; Cerda et al., 2015; Forsyth et al., 2015). Across the literature, there remains a gap in understanding how formerly incarcerated citizens find and maintain employment in their communities after prison (Bender et al., 2016; Cerda et al., 2015; Valentine & Redcross, 2015).

Furthermore, few existing studies described formerly incarcerated citizens' perspectives on the availability and usefulness of existing vocational and employment services (Bender et al., 2016; Cerda et al., 2015; Valentine & Redcross, 2015). Bender et al. (2016) noted a lack of literature describing consumer perspectives that could help improve vocational programming for incarcerated people preparing to return to society. Cerda et al. (2015) suggested a need for future research to explore formerly incarcerated citizens' perceptions related explicitly to living-wage employment. Valentine and Redcross (2015) emphasized a need for understanding consumer views about the dosage and continuity of pre- and post-release correctional vocational services. I designed my qualitative multiple case study to help fill this knowledge gap.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of existing literature related to employment and well-being for formerly incarcerated citizens. The scholarly discourse and previous studies have illustrated that sustainable wage employment can be critical for formerly incarcerated citizens' well-being after incarceration (Anderson et al., 2018; Duwe, 2015). I synthesized research describing what is known about in-custody and community reentry vocational service opportunities for incarcerated people across the United States. The literature suggested that improving the quality, quantity, duration, and continuity of vocational services for incarcerated people, during and after prison, may increase their chances for community reintegration success (American Psychological Association, 2017; Davis et al., 2014; Duwe, 2018; Harley, 2018; Richmond, 2014). I showed how existing research provided insight into framing my study with strengths-based theories (Holland, 1959; Rogers, 1946). Finally, I found no studies that explored formerly incarcerated citizens' thought and behavioral processes pertaining to how they overcame known challenges to finding sustainable wage employment and well-being. I intended to help fill this knowledge gap with my study, using qualitative multiple case study methodology and the perceptions and experiences of a diverse sample of formerly incarcerated citizens across the United States.

In Chapter 3, I described qualitative multiple case study research design and methodology and discussed my interview guide, informed consent, and other supporting materials for this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe and compare the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens to gain knowledge about how, if at all, they used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. I sought to describe user perceptions of some of the available services and the processes some people have used to gain sustainable wage employment despite what researchers have shown to be common personal deficits and social barriers for this population.

In this chapter, I describe my research plan using a descriptive, qualitative multiple case study design (see Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I discuss my role as the researcher, interpreter, and analyst of data. I detail the methods I used for participant selection and recruitment, developing an interview guide, and collecting and analyzing data. Additionally, I identify my plan for ensuring my study is dependable, confirmable, reliable, and transferable to the best of my abilities. Finally, I describe the ethical procedures I followed to ensure my participants were well informed about the study before consenting to participate. Specifically, I explain how I protected case identities and personal information while treating participants with dignity and respect throughout the research process.

Research Question

RQ: How, if at all, have formerly incarcerated citizens used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment?

Qualitative Case Study Research Design and Rationale

Researchers select qualitative research methodologies to provide scientific rigor and trustworthiness to studying social problems through human perceptions of life and peoples' lived experiences (Korstjens & Moser, 2018b). I chose to conduct qualitative rather than quantitative research based on my identification with Stake's (1995) description of three key considerations. According to Stake, a qualitative researcher seeks to construct knowledge rather than discover quantities and frequencies of occurrence, which is the goal of quantitative research. A qualitative researcher also takes a personal role in gathering, analyzing, and interpreting subjective data and plans to identify and manage predictable biases into a study design (Stake, 1995). Quantitative researchers, on the other hand, seek objectivity and remain personally disconnected from data. Additionally, a qualitative researcher's goal is to describe social phenomenon to help understand individual human realities. The objective is not to provide evidence of one truth or prove causation, as might be the purpose of quantitative studies.

Researchers use qualitative case studies to extend knowledge and better understand individuals, groups, events, and social relationships that are closely linked to the setting in which they occur (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Stake (1995) and Yin (2018) described the qualitative case study approach as an in-depth exploration of a case or unit of study bounded in some manner, such as by context. According to Stake and Yin, qualitative case studies can help construct a comprehensive understanding of a case or cases from people's complex and varied realities as they interact with society. A descriptive, qualitative multiple case study, rather than other qualitative methods such as

phenomenology, therefore, fulfilled the goal of my research: To describe and compare cases encompassing rich data from a variety of sources, I interpreted and organized the data into themes (see Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I described and compared separate cases of formerly incarcerated citizens' perceptions and experiences about how, if at all, they used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment.

Central Concepts

In my study, I sought to learn how some returned citizens obtained sustainable wage employment after incarceration. Although I considered other qualitative approaches for achieving my research purpose, I determined a multiple case study to be the most suitable method for understanding this social phenomenon. In a single study, I compared multiple cases bound by the context of similar life experiences (see Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I studied the perceptions and experiences of a sample of individuals who obtained employment after returning to U.S. communities from correctional facilities. To answer my research question, I gathered lived human experience and unique perceptions from individuals as data. I interpreted, cross-analyzed, synthesized, and reported data collected from individuals, as discussed later in this chapter. My qualitative multiple case study results help understand this complex, context-influenced social phenomenon.

A focus on both the uniqueness of individual, real-life circumstances, and the inseparability of the phenomenon of study from its natural setting (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018) was key to my choice of qualitative case study as a methodological approach. Individuals' abilities to obtain sustainable wages after prison depend on individual employability, work qualifications, and the availability of open positions in the

community to which each returned. Any person's use of pre- or postrelease vocational services depends upon the availability of programs in assigned correctional facilities and the community to which each person returns after incarceration. Therefore, the context was pertinent to understanding the phenomenon in question.

Justification for Selecting Qualitative Case Study

Yin (2018) proposed several reasons to use a qualitative case study as a research methodology. Yin's list of justifications included using the qualitative case study method to study a critical case, such as a case involving a sample of returned citizens across the United States who have obtained sustainable employment. According to Couloute and Kopf (2018), the unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated citizens in the United States is nearly 5 times greater than joblessness among the general population. As stated, more than 600,000 adult citizens return to communities across the country each year (Carson, 2018). Researchers have shown that 75% or more of this significant population are likely unemployed or underemployed 1 year after release from incarceration (Johnson & Cullen, 2015). Therefore, a qualitative case study to explore the critical cases of how some citizens do obtain sustainable wage employment was appropriate as a method of research.

According to Yin (2018), three conditions made selecting a qualitative case study over other qualitative methods most appropriate for my research. First, the qualitative case study research methodology is suitable for exploring *how* and *why* questions (Yin, 2018). My research question asked how returned citizens obtain sustainable wage employment after incarceration. Secondly, Yin advised that a qualitative case study is

well-suited as a research methodology when seeking to understand in-depth descriptions of a contemporary social phenomenon that occurs over time. My goal was to obtain a detailed description of the individual perceptions, processes, and possibly services people used to obtain sustainable wage employment after incarceration. Thirdly, Yin argued that a qualitative case study fits as a research method when context and setting are essential for understanding the study phenomenon. I sought to describe how citizens returning to communities across the country perceive their strengths, the employment opportunities in their home communities, and possibly any influence of vocational service availability on finding sustainable wage work. For my research, a qualitative multiple case study was useful for gathering and reporting the detailed descriptions that illustrate the unique stories of the diverse individuals who told them.

Alignment with Theoretical Framework

Researchers use qualitative case studies to investigate proposed how and why relationships between components of theories (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Stake (1995) suggested that some of what researchers have already theorized is relevant to understanding the research phenomenon. According to Stake, a qualitative case study typically results in a better understanding of a phenomenon by modifying broad theory or theories rather than the generation of entirely new knowledge. For this reason, I determined that a qualitative case study would be more useful than the grounded theory methodology. According to Yin (2018), a researcher's findings in a qualitative case study can enhance previous theories or lead to theory modification.

According to Stake (1995), case research complexity makes it probable that paradoxes would occur between the theories selected to frame my study and unique real-life situations. For this study, I did not know and could not predict the responses to questions I collected as data. However, as Harling (2002) and Stake (1995) suggested could happen, I could foresee the possibility that not all people's perceptions and experiences would align with my theoretical framework. Therefore, I used my strengths-based conceptual framework, as detailed in Chapter 2, to develop my interview guide. As advised by Harling and Stake, to maximize the potential for gaining new insight, I remained open-minded and flexible while collecting and analyzing data. Constructing new knowledge involved allowing my strengths-based theoretical framework to guide my interpretation of unique information as it was revealed. When a participant's response to a question did not align with strengths-based theories, I probed to explore contradictory responses that encouraged a richer understanding of this phenomenon. The lack of strengths-related experiences or vocational service opportunities reported by individuals was as crucial for understanding this social phenomenon as the positive incidents described.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was to serve as the primary instrument for gathering, interpreting, and reporting data. As explained by McGrath et al. (2018), performing these duties required that I co-create data with each interviewee. My role also necessitated that I ensure all aspects of my research adhered to the ethical standards that protect my human subjects from harm (see Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Levitt et al., 2017; McGrath et al.,

2018). Specifically, some participants might have felt shame and the repercussions of social stigma when asked to discuss opportunities and experiences during or after prison (Goffman, 1963; Rade et al., 2018). I attempted to manage this by establishing trust and positive rapport and ensuring confidentiality before our interviews. Additionally, as suggested by McGrath et al., I formally stated that I recognized my study participants were the experts of their own lives, empowering them to share first-hand accounts of their social experiences to help others. I remained aware and reflexive regarding my role in the conversation with each interviewee as the expert.

Before beginning my study, I completed foundational training in qualitative research as a doctoral student. I was transparent in my communications with participants, my data analysis, and my research reporting as suggested by Galdas (2017). Throughout the research process, I was also reflexive. I critically examined my preconceptions, the dynamics of emotional connections I had with participants, and my research focus when analyzing and reporting data. My professional background provided me with extensive practice in conducting one-to-one interviews. In addition to having practice asking open-ended questions with probes that entice respondents to reflect profoundly and articulate their answers in detail, I was proficient as a listener. In my daily work, I practiced confidentiality and privacy protocol and applied my developed strengths to my research. Furthermore, with the guidance and oversight of a proficient dissertation supervising committee, I felt confident in my competence and abilities to control bias and carry out my role as a researcher.

I recognized that my personal and professional background and my identification with a constructivist worldview influenced my decision to take on this specific role as the primary collector, interpreter, and reporter of data (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Stake, 1995). My role as a researcher was to help understand the social phenomenon I chose to study through the personal interpretation of the diverse individual perceptions of reality expressed by people with first-hand experience (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). My qualitative multiple case study results reflect my subjective understanding of the cases, or what the data, that is composed of multiple realities, may mean in the broad context of life (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Confidentiality and Privacy

I protected my human subjects and their privacy. I ensured that individuals could not be identified or connected to personal information shared in private interviews and recorded as data. I used pseudonyms in place of participants' names throughout my study. I first used participant-selected pseudonyms throughout the data-gathering phase and then replaced those names with aliases of my choosing before reporting data. I interviewed only adults living as free citizens who had the language abilities and cognitive capacity to read, hear, and comprehend my research procedures and informed consent process. I did not have a personal or professional relationship with any participants at any time, and I did not have other ethical issues related to my research.

Methodology

In this section, I described the participant selection protocol I followed for this study. I explained the sample size rationale and how I determined data saturation. I also

discussed the procedure I used to recruit participants for my research. I provided detailed information about how I developed my interview guide and the techniques I used to collect and analyze data. Finally, I discussed the strategies I used to ensure my study results' trustworthiness and that I conducted my research following ethical guidelines.

Participant Selection Protocol and Inclusion Criteria

The United States of America has the largest population of incarcerated people among the countries of the world (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). Additionally, people of both genders, all ages, and varying racial and demographic backgrounds may serve time in more than 5,000 adult correctional facilities across the county (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). These institutions offer differing vocational programs and transitional work opportunities (Davis et al., 2014; Looney & Turner, 2018). After release from incarceration, citizens return home to urban, suburban, or rural communities across the country (Morenoff & Harding, 2014). Their communities vary in affluence and opportunities for obtaining sustainable wage employment, based on industrial development and geographical concentration of businesses that employ citizens (Morenoff & Harding, 2014; NELP, 2016).

Therefore, my goal for selecting study participants was to sample the diversity in circumstances and experiences (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995) among formerly incarcerated citizens to understand better how people obtain sustainable wage employment after incarceration. I used purposive sampling to recruit a heterogeneous sample of people (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995) from various geographical regions of the country, who may have had different opportunities for vocational services and diverse

experiences finding employment after incarceration. This sampling strategy helped increase the potential for both the uniqueness of personal experiences and patterns and commonalities in the diversity (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995).

My study's sample selection inclusion criteria invited diversity among participants (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). For this study, I selected participants from the population of citizens who self-identified as:

- A citizen who returned to a U.S. community after being incarcerated for at least one year,
- A person who obtained employment that he or she perceived as "sustainable wage" and
- A volunteer who could speak, read and understand conversational English.

I did not require past participation in vocational service programs during or after incarceration. In recent research, Smith (2016) and Ring and Gill (2017) noted that less than 6% of incarcerated people enroll in correctional vocational programming, and little information is available about the use of community services after prison.

Sample Size

Researchers who conduct qualitative studies typically select small samples to make the time-consuming task of analyzing rich subjective data achievable (Yin, 2018). According to Yin (2018), the sample size is not a critical factor or relevant to the case study because the goal is not generalizability but rather an in-depth understanding of social circumstances in a particular context. I recruited and interviewed 6 participants, selected to represent a diversity of individual experiences (Luborsky & Rubinstein,

1995). I considered the distinct geographical and industrial influences on employment in different U.S. regions (Watson et al., 2004) when selecting this sample size. My sample size was small enough to allow accurate processing of extensive data during analysis while large enough to encourage data saturation (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Recruitment

I recruited study participants from various sources to increase the potential for diversity and minimize selection bias (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I requested permission from the administrators of Facebook pages related to community reentry after incarceration to post flyers for recruiting interested volunteers. To encourage more participants, I added snowballing sampling strategy, asking volunteers to suggest other potential cases.

I instructed interested volunteers to call, text, or message me, the researcher, by phone or email, providing contact information on the flyers. To protect their privacy, I encouraged interested volunteers to contact me using the email address I provide and not make comments in the open forum area of Facebook pages.

Screening and Informing Volunteers for Participation

I listed general information about my study, inclusion criteria, and contact information on flyers and postings to websites. When potential participants contacted me, either by phone or by email, I used a script and screening questionnaire (see Appendix A: Screening Questionnaire) to ensure volunteers met the inclusion criteria and provided additional information about my study. In my script and screening questions, I attempted

to convey a relaxed and easy-going nature and establish cordial rapport during our initial contact (McGrath et al., 2018).

For volunteers who qualified for my study and expressed interest during our initial contact, I gathered demographic information (see Appendix B: Demographics Questionnaire). I also requested an email address and sent written information about the study and an informed consent document for potential volunteers to review. Included in this information were instructions for providing electronic consent before I scheduled interviews. I stored all written consent documents that identify participants by name in password-protected digital files to protect my participants' identities.

Additionally, along with the written information about my study, I provided a list of the interview questions for preview volunteers (see Appendix C: Interview Guide). Sending the interview questions in advance:

- Provided an opportunity for fully informed consent (Stanlick, 2011),
- Helped reduce stress and increase participants' comfort (Stanlick, 2011) when discussing personal perceptions and experiences over the telephone,
- Provided an opportunity for volunteers to ask questions to help them decide whether to participate (McGrath et al., 2018), and
- Allowed volunteers to prepare better to be the experts on their lives (McGrath et al., 2018) and articulate in-depth answers to questions that increased the richness of data (Stanlick, 2011).

Instrumentation

As the sole researcher, I was the primary instrument for data collection (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; McGrath et al., 2018). Because I sought to recruit study participants who work and reside in diverse regions of the geographically large United States of America, I chose to gather data using telephone interviews. According to Drabble et al. (2016), not only is telephone interviewing appropriate for time efficiency, but this interview method has proven to be useful for gathering information from stigmatized and hard-to-reach populations, such as formerly incarcerated citizens working across the United States.

Interview Guide

The primary instrumentation for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C: Interview Guide). I produced this guide specifically for this study to follow when collecting extensive subjective data through telephone interviews. I used the guide to ensure thoroughness and consistency among interviews, but with flexibility, as each participant and I co-created rich data (McGrath et al., 2018).

I recognized that my professional experience as a rehabilitation counselor influenced the development of my interview guide. My strengths-based theoretical framework also inspired my choice of interview questions. As suggested by Arsel (2017), my interview guide had three distinct sections: an opening, the questions, and a closing. I made specific vocabulary choices in creating my interview questions that considered my participants' life circumstances and experiences (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Opening. I wrote the first section of my interview guide as an opening script, using conversational vocabulary to invite participants to engage (Arsel, 2017). I did not

record this section of the interviews (Arsel, 2017). Instead, in this section, I developed a friendly rapport with clients to reduce power differential (Arsel, 2017). I described my study and its purpose, explained the interview procedures, and invited each participant to take the expert's role in our conversation. I also asked participants to feel free to interrupt me or ask questions at any time (Arsel, 2017). I emphasized the ethical procedures I would follow to protect people's privacy and ensure participants understood they were permitted to stop the interview at any time (Arsel, 2017).

As stated, I emailed my informed consent document for participant review before conducting each interview. The informed consent document clearly stated that telephone interviews would be audio recorded. To ensure understanding, before beginning the recorded interview, I read the consent document aloud to request additional verbal acknowledgment from each participant (Arsel, 2017). I asked if each had any questions about the study and procedures. When interviewees acknowledged that they felt informed about the study and consented to participate, I requested permission to begin audio recording. Then, I started asking the interview questions in the second section of my guide (Arsel, 2017).

Data Collection Questions. I composed the questions in my interview guide to encourage detailed insight into how unique individuals experienced the process of finding sustainable wage employment after incarceration (Arsel, 2017). Using my guide, I asked open-ended questions about people's job-seeking processes and any vocational services opportunities each may have had. As stated, I had provided my interview questions

before our scheduled telephone interviews to allow study volunteers to deeply reflect on their beliefs, experiences, and emotions before answering (Stanlick, 2011).

The process I used to create my open-ended interview questions followed suggestions made by Arsel (2017) and Yin (2018) to increase my study's rigor. I followed Arsel's interview guide tutorial to ensure my questions were nonthreatening. I used a questioning technique that allowed participants to control the narrative and to feel comfortable saying what they wanted to say, the way they wanted to say it. I developed my questions with flexibility in mind so that my interviews flowed like a guided conversation rather than forced question and answer sessions (Yin, 2018). To gain knowledge about the psychology related to employment after incarceration, vocational services, and sustainable wages, I created questions that addressed participants' personal feelings and beliefs (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018). I anticipated potential probes I could use with the milestone questions to entice deeper reflection about individual interaction with society and each case's connection to a specific setting and context (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018). I also anticipated that I would incorporate spontaneous probes during my interviews to invite unexpected and emergent data (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Additionally, I followed the suggestions of Arsel (2017) on establishing rapport during an interview. I remained mindful of the power dynamics that can influence participant comfort levels during qualitative interviews. As stated, I composed questions that allowed me to explore themes related to my research's central concepts. However, I used my interview guide in a flexible way that followed each participant's story (Arsel, 2017). My data collection goal was to explore the diverse stories to gain information that

could lead to ideas beyond what is known and outside my worldview (Arsel, 2017). I permitted participants to direct the conversation to prevent my preconceptions and biases from interfering with gained understanding (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018). Finally, to improve my questions' wording and flow, I attempted to imagine myself living my study participants' lives and how I might feel about expressing my perceptions, experiences, and beliefs freely in conversation (Arsel, 2017).

As stated, my informed consent document clearly said that telephone interviews for my study would be recorded. Following my unrecorded opening script, I notified each participant that I had started recording our conversation. I began each recorded interview with an icebreaker question (Arsel, 2017). I used the response to this icebreaker as data for my study (Arsel, 2017). I used multiple spontaneous probes related to each participant's initial answer to this question to begin transforming the interview into a conversation (Arsel, 2017). I anticipated that answering this icebreaker question could help each participant begin to relax and feel comfortable conversing with me, the researcher, (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018) over the telephone.

I attempted to answer my research question using the open-ended questions in my interview guide. I intended for the interview questions help participants articulate their individual experiences and perceptions related to five areas:

1. Self-identified employment-related strengths;
2. How work-related interests, education, prior work, and career goals may have influenced job searches and choices;

3. What opportunities individuals may have had for vocational guidance, job skills training, or employment assistance in prison or in communities after release;
4. Actions participants may have taken to improve their employment qualifications, secure sustainable wage employment, or advance in their careers during or after prison; and
5. Each person's story about searching for and obtaining employment he or she believes pays sustainable wages.

Closing. When a participant had answered my interview questions, I stopped recording each interview and debriefed each participant. I summarized how the completed interview would contribute to the study. I provided information about the next steps in the study procedures, answered any additional questions, checked contact information for follow-up, and expressed sincere gratitude for each person's participation.

Instrument for Triangulation of Data

I attempted to strengthen my study's trustworthiness by comparing or triangulating data gathered in telephone interviews with information obtained from publicly available internet sources (Fusch et al., 2018 Yin, 2018). I searched for data about the vocational programs in the various correctional facilities in which participants resided and information about post-release services offered in their home communities. I attempted to use records I found to verify and support the testimonies gathered in interviews (Fusch et al., 2018 Yin, 2018). I used a researcher-created document to

organize this data (see Appendix D: Table of Supporting Public Records). I recorded information I found in public records into table format to efficiently compare archival data to subjective interview results (University of Wisconsin, 2019).

Procedures for Data Collection

As the sole researcher, I collected primary data using semi-structured telephone interviews with formerly incarcerated citizens who found sustainable employment in the United States. I also collected data using internet searches of services in correctional facilities and communities to verify what participants told me about vocational programming (Fusch et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). No one else collected or handled the raw data for this study. I scheduled interviews at a frequency of up to two per week, according to participants' availability. This frequency allowed me to transcribe audio tapes and synchronize my notes directly after interviews, while each conversation was fresh in my mind (Baškarada, 2014). Additionally, this frequency allowed me to research public records about the vocational services and employment opportunities in the specific correctional facilities and communities discussed in each interview.

Each of the six case interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. I allowed participants to reflect deeply and tell their stories, converse freely, be the experts of their own lives, and teach me about their perceptions and experiences (Arsel, 2017; Baškarada, 2014 McGrath et al., 2018). I debriefed participants before terminating our telephone interviews.

All interviews were audio-recorded. Using a pen and pad, I took notes during our conversations about how participant responses related to my theoretical framework and research purpose. Additionally, I used bracketing to make memos (see Appendix F:

Example Memo) about my awareness of my own emotions and biases during interviews (Arsel, 2017; McGrath et al., 2018). My data collection timeframe extended from the first interview date until I had recruited and interviewed six formerly incarcerated citizens.

Data Analysis Plan

I transcribed audio recordings of my interviews immediately following the telephone conversations and began data analysis as soon as possible. I performed data analysis while my memory was fresh, allowing me to add self-reflection about each interview's nuances and emotional distinctions (Yin, 2018). I also completed member checking or asking participants to review my interpretations of their words for accuracy as soon as I had completed data analysis (Houghton et al., 2015).

I organized, categorized, and identified patterns in the extensive data I collected to reduce its complexity, as suggested by Arsel (2017) and Yin (2018). I used content analysis to identify ideas expressed within each case and thematic analysis to distinguish similarities and differences among case data (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018). I highlighted potentially relevant information using pre-determined themes that helped link pieces of data to my research question. Simultaneously, I sorted out fragments of each participants' answers, explanations, and descriptions that did not apply to my study (Houghton et al., 2015). This process allowed me to compare the relevant data within and between the cases (Arsel, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Using content analysis, I identified keywords and phrases in the subjective data (Yin, 2018). I applied code and category names to organize extensive data (Houghton et al., 2015). Content coding allowed me to interpret participants' descriptions of their

experiences and perceptions for later comparison to understand the cases and answer my research question (Yin, 2018). I then used thematic analysis to group codes and categories identified in individual data sources and searched for patterns that could help identify emergent themes (Yin, 2018). I also located inconsistent or divergent data from either my theoretical framework or information gained from other cases. I reflected on these data sources and my processes for determining the interpreted meaning (Yin, 2018).

As I added data from more interviews, I categorized it using tables that depicted my analytic processes and logic (Houghton et al., 2015). These tables helped me visualize the data's patterns and discrepancies. Finally, to ensure validity, I triangulated my findings by examining my results compared to existing literature (Yin, 2018). I detailed my processes, codes, and comparison tables in my final report in Chapter 4.

Issues of Trustworthiness

One of my primary goals for this study was to add trustworthy knowledge to the research base, to increase understanding of the processes people use to obtain sustainable wage work after prison. In Chapter 4, I documented and reported the steps I took for transparency through the research process.

Credibility

To perform holistic inquiry, as a critical feature of qualitative case study methodology, I collected detail-rich data from multiple sources, including one-to-one interviews and public records (Fusch et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). Fusch et al. (2018) noted that triangulation adds depth to the data collected in qualitative research and increases the potential for data saturation with small samples. I used public records on vocational

program opportunities in specific correctional facilities and communities when an individual participant may have used them. I used data triangulation between the information sources to increase validity (Fusch et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). My research involved learning about the processes a sample of individuals used to obtain work and how each person's unique situation influenced individual employment outcomes. Instead of reporting just case stories, I synthesized data to understand better what might be happening across the United States (Boblin et al., 2013).

I used member checking to ensure that I recounted participants' perceptions and experiences with the intended meaning (Houghton et al., 2015). I used mentoring and reflection to manage my assumptions and biases (Arsel, 2017).

Transferability

To purposefully recruit participants who have had diverse opportunities and experiences finding sustainable wage employment after incarceration, I used a maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling strategy (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). This sampling strategy increased the potential for identifying the uniqueness of personal experiences and patterns amid the purposefully recruited diversity (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). My study has potential for transferability across the different county, state, and federal correctional systems because I recruited participants who had a broad range of vocational service and employment opportunities across the United States (Yin, 2018). I used detail-rich descriptions in reporting the diverse perceptions and lived experiences of my participants (Yin, 2018). I maximized the potential that future research may replicate or extend my work by focusing on transparency and rigor (Yin, 2018).

Dependability

To increase research dependability, Fusch et al. (2018) and Yin (2018) suggested checking the accuracy of data gathered in qualitative interviews using public archival records. I confirmed my vocational programming findings from subjective interview transcripts by triangulating data collected from internet sources (Fusch et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). To increase my study's dependability, I checked for accuracy in the data I collected in qualitative interviews and compared the information I gathered with public records (Yin, 2018).

Confirmability

I identified my values, assumptions, biases, and vulnerabilities that had the potential to influence my effectiveness as a researcher if left unchecked (Levitt et al., 2017). For example, I anticipated feeling empathetic toward study participants and hopeful for their successes. To ensure participants' ethical treatment and reliable research results, I adhered rigorously to data collection, analysis, and reporting protocol to manage my bias (Levitt et al., 2017). I documented my thoughts, emotions, and awareness of bias or assumptions during data collection, analysis, and reporting using a reflexive process (Levitt et al., 2017). I engaged in bracketing, or consciously identifying and purposefully setting aside my personal beliefs and preconceived ideas when collecting, analyzing, and reporting research data (Levitt et al., 2017). I used the questions in my semi-structured interview guide as checkpoints, with flexibility, to allow the interviewees to tell their stories in their words. I paraphrased for clarity to guard against researcher bias (McGrath et al., 2018).

Ethical Procedures

My research goal was to describe cases of a phenomenon involving the perceptions and experiences of human participants. Walden University's Institutional Review Board approved my study proposal (approval number 06-24-20-0389640) and permitted me to conduct my research. I completed the CITI Program: Human Subjects Research Course (see Appendix E: Human Subjects Research Course Certificate). I followed the ethical guidelines of Walden University and the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, my professional code of ethics, when designing my study. Therefore, I incorporated respect for participants' autonomy, promoting well-being, developing and honoring trust in researcher-participant relationships, treating people equally, doing no harm, and being honest (Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, 2016). I specifically planned my study to respect participants as my equals, protect their privacy, and guard them against social stigma.

Confidentiality

I did not use the study participants' real names or any information that could give away identities in my recorded interviews, data analysis, or research report. Instead, in all recorded data, I referred to participants by aliases, as unique identifiers, to keep the human touch while protecting confidentiality (Arsel, 2017). The only written record of volunteer names exists in password-protected email addresses and signed informed consent documents. This confidential information was not shared with anyone else or included in my final report. Digital records containing confidential information will remain password-protected until they are destroyed.

I also refrained from naming the companies that employ my study participants to protect their privacy. I used generic business and career field descriptions in my records, such as “landscaping business supervisor” or “employed by a non-profit employment agency.”

Informed Consent Process

I began explaining the process of informed consent in my initial contact with volunteers, by email or telephone. All six volunteers stated interest in continuing after the initial screening, so I emailed written information about my study and a list of my semi-structured interview questions for individual review. I chose to share my interview questions in advance to fully-inform volunteers about study participation requirements. I obtained electronic informed consent by email, and I re-read the document before each recorded interview to request verbal acknowledgment of informed consent.

Secure Storage of Data

Walden University requires that audio recordings of telephone interviews and written data obtained through email be stored in password-protected digital files for five years after study completion. After transcribing them into digital files, I shredded paper copies of any hand-written notes I took during interviews. After five years have passed, I will permanently delete these password-protected digital files.

Summary

In this Chapter, I provided a rationale for designing my research as a multiple, descriptive qualitative case study. I described my role as the researcher and sole gatherer, interpreter, and reporter of data. I detailed the methods I used for participant selection and

recruitment and the logic behind my choices. I explained how I developed my interview guide and collected and analyzed the data I gathered in interviews. I also identified how I ensured the trustworthiness of my study to the best of my abilities. Finally, I described the ethical procedures I followed that confirmed my participants were well informed about the study before consenting to participate. I concluded by explaining how I protected my participants' identities and personal information and treated them with dignity and respect throughout the research process.

In Chapter 4, I described participant demographics, the telephone interview setting, my data collection and analysis processes, and my study results.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe and compare the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens to gain knowledge about how, if at all, they used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. I selected a qualitative multiple case study as a method for collecting, analyzing, and reporting my findings. Using a multiple case study design, I first studied separate cases of individual perceptions and experiences. Then, as suggested by Brink (2018), Stake (1995), and Yin (2018), I synthesized my independent case findings to show how, together, the cases may contribute to answering my research question.

In this chapter, I describe my recruiting procedures, the research setting, and the data collection process I used. I then explain how I organized the rich subjective data by coding expressions of thought and descriptions of experiences in each case that might help better understand this research topic. In this step, I incorporated data from recorded semistructured interviews, public records of vocational service programs, and memos I wrote during the data collection process to increase my study's trustworthiness. Next, I describe the cross-case thematic analysis process I used to identify and interpret meaning and relationships as I categorize the words individuals chose to express perceptions and experiences. Finally, I explain how I consolidated codes and categories discovered among the voices of case participants to identify six overarching themes, and I present the results of my research.

The Research Setting

I designed my research to help understand a social phenomenon in real-world settings as consistent with Stake (1995) and Yin (2018). Using a qualitative multiple case study design allowed me to explore six unique content-specific cases and then compare them for a greater understanding.

I interviewed six individuals by telephone, recorded their responses to predetermined interview questions using a phone call recording application, and uploaded the recordings to an online transcription service to obtain a verbatim Microsoft Word document. The case participants each interviewed from a quiet, private location. All the recordings were audible upon replay. The free service produced written transcriptions, and I verified each document's accuracy through member checking. I stored all audio recordings and written transcriptions in password-protected electronic files. I emailed each transcribed document to the individual participants for member checking before proceeding with data analysis. I also emailed copies of the audio recordings and written transcripts to my committee chairperson for review.

Data Collection

My data collection process involved (a) recruiting case participants, (b) communicating information about my study by email and telephone, (c) obtaining informed consent to participate, (d) recording individual telephone interviews, (e) uploading audio recordings to an online transcription service, and (f) emailing written transcripts to study participants for member checking.

Recruitment

Taking precautions against the coronavirus pandemic, all recruiting took place online and by telephone because community centers and workforce development agencies were closed. As planned in my Institutional Review Board-approved proposal, I began recruiting participants for my study by emailing the administrators of nine reentry organization Facebook pages. I requested and gained permission to post a recruitment flyer with additional study information on their Facebook pages. The recruitment flyer and information page contained a Google Voice phone number for contacting me by phone or text message and my Walden University student email address. I used the Google Voice telephone number and Walden University email address for all research correspondence.

The first volunteer contacted me by text message about 3 weeks after I began recruiting. After obtaining the volunteer's permission to telephone, I called to verify eligibility and begin to establish an amicable rapport. During our initial phone conversation, I asked the volunteer to select a fictitious first name we could use as an alias for protecting the participant's privacy throughout the research. (Later in my research process, for all participants, I changed the self-selected nicknames to a pseudonym of my choosing to further protect anonymity. I used the participant-selected aliases when conversing with volunteers and in our telephone interviews. I used the fictitious names I selected throughout the written report of my study).

I asked the first volunteer to provide an email address to send detailed information for member checking and the summarized report of this research study. After our call, I

sent detailed information, the interview questions, a demographic questionnaire, and the informed consent document. The participant returned the signed informed consent document, and we scheduled our telephone interview. I used the same procedure to screen, inform, and recruit each of the other five volunteers. I provided study information, established cordial rapport, obtained demographic questionnaires and informed consent documents, and scheduled each interview.

Interview Process

At the scheduled time for our interviews, I telephoned each participant. Before starting the recording application, using only participant-selected aliases, I re-explained the study process described in our initial phone conversation and written information sent by email. I shared my background as a Walden student and motivation to understand this social issue, to help establish ease of conversation (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018a; Yin, 2018). Using each person's pseudonym and developing a personal connection before beginning each interview, I helped assure participants that I understood the importance of anonymity and held them in high regard for their willingness to share their lived experiences.

Before starting the audio recording application, I read the informed consent document over the phone and asked each participant to confirm understanding of my study procedures. Each participant had previously read the form and consented to my study by email. I reiterated that each interviewee could end participation in the interview for any reason and reschedule or withdraw from my research at any time. After

participants restated their agreement to participate, I began recording each interview, following my semistructured interview guide.

Transcription

After each interview, I immediately uploaded the recorded audio file to an online software application to obtain a written transcription draft. I used the software to remove filler words and replay the audio recording as I made corrections to phrases that were not clear in the initial draft. I read and made corrections to each transcript and emailed the written transcripts to individual participants for member checking the day after each interview. I also emailed a copy of the audio recordings and written transcripts to my committee chairperson for procedural review. When the participant had confirmed my accuracy and my chairperson approved my recordings and transcripts, I began inductive coding of the written data.

Data Analysis

As suggested by Stake (1995) and Yin (2018), I developed and used a consistent procedure to analyze and report the data as I coded. I used a two-phase data analysis process to study each case separately before generalizing my findings by exploring themes that emerged among the data (see Brink, 2018; Yin, 2018). In Phase 1, I completed analysis of case content to explore situational uniqueness and the complexity of the research topic as perceived by each participant. I used content-coding to analyze the rich subjective data, identifying and counting relevant words and expressions of thought in each of the six interview transcripts. My Phase 1 process involved coding case data manually and then linking first-round codes into categories. For Phase 2, in cross-

case thematic analysis and synthesis I looked for similarities, differences, and redundancy among the separate cases and identified emergent overarching themes (see Brink, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The significant themes were expressed repeatedly by all participants and are listed in Table 6 and Appendix G: Code Book.

The data I analyzed for this study included (a) participant responses to a demographic questionnaire, (b) member-checked transcriptions of subjective responses to recorded interview questions, (c) memos I wrote while conversing with participants, and (d) archival information about vocational services in case-related correctional facilities and communities.

In this section, I explain how I grouped hundreds of codes into categories, confirmed data saturation, and how themes emerged as I reduced the rich data by linking my interpretations of code meanings (see Brink, 2018; Yin, 2018). In reporting my data, I changed each participant's self-chosen alias to a pseudonym of my choosing to further protect anonymity.

Demographics

Each case's unique context involving individual background and lived experiences, length of time incarcerated, the correctional facility in which a person resided, and type of community to which each returned after prison influenced the rich data I gathered. I asked each study participant to complete a demographic questionnaire before our telephone interview (see Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire). Table 1 depicts this data for comparison.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Gender	Race	Geographic location	Education	Type of correctional facility	Years served
F	B	Urban South	Master's degree	State Prison	5
F	B	Urban Midwest	Master's degree currently in a doctoral program	Federal Prison	1
M	W	Urban South	Some College	Private Contract State Prison	4.5
M	W	Suburban Midwest	Bachelor's degree currently enrolled in a master's program	State Prison	4
M	H	Urban West	Multiple (3) associate's degrees	State Prison	25
M	W	Suburban West	Multiple (2) master's degrees	Federal Prison	9.5

Phase 1: Individual Case Analysis

According to Brink (2018), Stake (1995), and Yin (2018), the first phase in a multiple case study requires studying the cases separately to learn about their situational uniqueness and complexities. I selected a qualitative multiple case study method to illuminate individuals' diversity and their pathways to finding sustainable wage employment after incarceration. As a first step in understanding this complex phenomenon, I scrutinized the interviews' written transcripts as soon as possible to learn about each case in depth. I became familiar with each participant's detail-rich responses after our telephone conversations and while replaying and rereading them when editing

transcriptions. While each interview was still fresh in my mind, I began assigning meaning to the rich subjective data in content-coding analysis.

First-Round Coding

I performed first-round content-coding by manually selecting interview transcript text relevant to each specific interview question or related to my strengths-based theoretical framework (see Brink, 2018; Yin, 2018). I attempted to capture the intended meaning of ideas and experiences that each case participant expressed using their words and phrases (Brink, 2018). As I coded line-by-line, I circled and began listing words and phrases that were important for understanding the topic and specific questions I asked. I underlined any tallied words and phrases that reoccurred. The line-by-line micro-analysis of the first transcript resulted in 391 total codes. I counted similar ideas every time they occurred, even if they were repeated concepts or synonyms of another word. The second through sixth transcripts yielded similar code counts during my first-round microanalysis, with 210 being the fewest and 408 the highest code counts among the individual cases. After coding each of the six transcripts, I charted the words and expressions I coded and tallied them by cases (see Appendix G: Code Book).

Second-Round Coding

Upon completing first-round coding for each interview transcript, I examined the ideas that had reoccurred multiple times as suggested by Brink (2018), Stake (1995), and Yin 2018). I used colored pencils to highlight words and phrases, line by line, as I combined ideas and expressions. The colors helped me visualize the emergence of more focused categories as I linked some of the first-round codes and began to consider

relationships between thoughts and phrases. I also used colors to identify emotional expressions and verbatim quotations that inspired my emotions. By consolidating the meaning I interpreted from hundreds of coded words and phrases, I increased my understanding of each case's rich data (Brink, 2018).

Upon completing second-round coding for all six cases, I combined the most common expressions from hundreds of first-round codes into 33 categories. I found evidence of each of the 33 categories in all the case transcripts. Table 2 portrays a sample of how I reduced hundreds of first-round codes to encompassing second-round categories. A complete Code Book is available in Appendix G: Code Book.

Table 2

Example of First-Round to Second-Round Coding

1st-round codes	2nd-round categories
For some of us, we're just fortunate we're in the right place at the right time. In my situation with work, I say I just got lucky. Using my VA loan options, I was able to buy a house. Just to be given another opportunity at life and freedom. Luckily my previous education made that part easy. I realized how far ahead in opportunities I was. I was fortunate I was able to collect my pension for a period. My retirement and GI Bill gave me a leg up.	Blessings others did not have.
Being rejected by parole- helped prepare for rejection in society. The program allowed me to be put in the place that got me my job. I cherish the time to use them [computers]. It was inspiring to see the automation and technology involved. There's a lot of opportunities for growth. What I do is essential [employed during a pandemic].	Opportunities for growth.
An officer [correctional] told me to take advantage of any computer classes. Had it not been for the library-that's where I did my first online job application. I was extremely blessed just to be on her [substance use counselor's] caseload. [Agency] helped me get a job that paid more than I'd ever made in my entire life. The halfway house enabled me to shortcut my way into the job market. Some of the guys in the halfway house gave me clothes. I live with my mother- she got to retire, and I'm paying the mortgage.	"Village" support.
Learning has come easy to me. I was blessed with good work ethic. Glad I learned those things because I implement them now in programs for others. I enjoy helping people accomplish their goals- I just enjoy the journey.	Gratitude for personal strengths.
Those are the moments that are priceless- It's not just about pay. God put me in that place. But this is where God comes in- God provided. God gave me exactly what I needed. It's such a blessing I wasn't expecting- I'm so grateful to God.	Gratitude for spiritual connection.

Note: Total code counts are displayed in Appendix G: Code Book

Phase 2: Cross-Case Thematic Analysis

Upon completing second-round content analysis by coding, I had a strong understanding of each case and the rich subjective data I had gathered from individual interviews (Nowell et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). As suggested by Nowell et al. (2017), Stake (1995), and Yin (2018), I used a rigorous process of cross-case thematic analysis to detect overarching themes that could help answer my research question. Line-by-line, case-by-case, and finally identifying common data between cases, I again color-coded written transcripts to organize overlapping expressions of thought and descriptions of experiences among the cases (Nowell et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). I further reduce my codes and categories of data to six overarching themes (Nowell et al., 2017).

I combined first- and second-round codes related to overcoming barriers to employment, work readiness, and tenacity in a theme I named *perseverance*. I categorized ideas like asking for help from others, explaining a felony conviction, and feeling judged or ashamed under *humility*. Being thankful for past advantages, obtaining a job, family support, and reentry resources are examples of codes I combined in *gratitude*. My *redemption* theme encompassed codes such as getting my life back, self-forgiveness, feeling valued as a person, and proving myself to others. In m*aking something good from adverse experiences*, I clustered codes such as hope for other justice-involved people, mentoring peers, and using the lived experience as a strength. Finally, I combined codes such as achieving autonomy, responsible citizenry, developing skills, and doing meaningful work in a theme I named *purposeful living*.

Table 3

Example Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Themes
Confidence ▪ Excelling ▪ Initiative ▪ Persistence ▪ Readiness for work ▪ Readiness for opportunities ▪ Preparedness ▪ Tenacity ▪ Strong work ethic ▪ Overcoming barriers ▪ Consistency ▪ Getting out there and searching ▪ It is not easy ▪ Don't give up ▪ Continual self-improvement ▪ Determined to get out and rebuild my life ▪ Being mobile is crucial ▪ Continue to network ▪ When the opportunity presented itself, I seized it ▪ I was determined ▪ I enrolled in a local university.	▪ Taking the initiative ▪ Excelling not just working ▪ Tenacity/determination ▪ Strong work ethic ▪ Readiness/preparedness ▪ Doing the hard work	Perseverance
I had to be humble ▪ Humbling experience ▪ Asking for help ▪ Accept the help and grow ▪ Being incarcerated you realize how little you need ▪ No shame in using available services ▪ Felt judged ▪ Had to accept stigma ▪ Tell the truth about conviction ▪ Having the hard conversation ▪ Feeling shame/embarrassment ▪ Not being a statistic ▪ Took any job at first ▪ A little overconfident ▪ Put college on the back burner ▪ Had to become responsible for myself ▪ Went in at entry-level ▪ Just to be able to be independent ▪ Email and internet were new to me ▪ Understanding that I don't know everything-that there're people that are way smarter than myself ▪ God's will. God's time ▪ Not afraid to ask questions today ▪ It's not a whole bunch of hours, but I got my foot in the door ▪ A person with my skills and expertise has had to struggle to even find work ▪ I'm not allowed to use the internet or go into people's homes ▪ Friends housed me until I got on my feet ▪ Any employer I find has to be willing to have computers monitored ▪ Had to meet with a board to be allowed to go to school there ▪ I'm overqualified for all the jobs I've applied for.	▪ Asking for and accepting help ▪ Felt judged or stigmatized ▪ Telling the truth about conviction ▪ Negative emotion ▪ Being humble	Humility
The opportunity was a blessing ▪ Developed a spiritual connection ▪ Job market was strong ▪ Relied on skills I already had ▪ Had tech skills some people don't have ▪ Had advantages other people didn't have ▪ I realized how far ahead in opportunities I was ▪ Obtaining a job ▪ Health insurance ▪ Company vehicle ▪ Family support ▪ Come from a strong family ▪ My village ▪ Resources available at reentry ▪ Opportunities ▪ In this business before incarceration ▪ Decent place to live ▪ A car ▪ Blessed to be on her caseload ▪ They provided a temp job ▪ Other guys gave me clothes ▪ Inspiring to learn ▪ Give back and you'll be blessed ▪ Transitional housing put me in the place that got me my job ▪ large family-always somebody looking out for me ▪ Family encouraged good values and kept me in touch with reality ▪ Learning has come easy to me ▪ God put me in this place ▪ I was fortunate ▪ Right place, right time ▪ I still cherish time on computers ▪ Luckily my previous education made that part easy ▪ I had experience and that doesn't happen to everybody ▪ I had loan options ▪ House payment is covered by retirement.	▪ Blessings/advantages others didn't have ▪ "Village" support ▪ Spiritual connection ▪ Opportunities and resources ▪ Sustainable employment to have more than just necessities	Gratitude

Codes	Categories	Themes
Felon-friendly agencies ▪ Valued as a skilled person ▪ Getting my life back ▪ Self-forgiveness ▪ Helping others ▪ Getting in on the ground level and proving myself ▪ Proving to myself ▪ Incentivized to go out and be the person I know I am ▪ Required to go to church/Bible study ▪ You don't have to worry who's knocking on your door ▪ You don't have that suffering or pain or stressful life ▪ Live life without criminal element ▪ Productive citizen ▪ Are we, citizens? ▪ I wanted to go back to school ▪ It was important to get out and be self-supportive-to pay my way in society ▪ I know that more education and knowledge can make me more of an asset to an organization ▪ The accomplishments of the people I assist make my work meaningful.	▪ Second chance/freedom ▪ Self-forgiveness ▪ Helping others/giving back ▪ Be the person I know I am ▪ Being valued as a person	Redemption
Give people hope ▪ Leading, teaching, mentoring, coaching peers ▪ Using the lived experience as a strength ▪ You know you're strong to survive that experience ▪ Making the experience a moniker for: you can come back from this ▪ You can make the next chapters in your life better than that one ▪ I took responsibility for my choices and stopped blaming others ▪ I learned to be accountable ▪ I learned there are victims ▪ I learned to stop contributing to the bad out there ▪ Developed my spiritual relationship ▪ Improved my "spiritual space" ▪ I encourage them using myself as an example ▪ Read 300 books in 4 years ▪ Now, I assist justice-impacted individuals-make it easier for others ▪ Mandated transitional housing put me in the place that got me my job ▪ Took advantage of every opportunity to work or improve my skills ▪ Developed confidence and self-worth doing work and taking courses in prison ▪ Dealt with unresolved problems and negative attitudes in prison ▪ I went for training and got a job ▪ At a mandated training they offered free library cards ▪ When I'm helping an individual I maybe walked the same yard with and I see them flourish ▪ I want to make it easier for them because I know the huge obstacles ▪ I learned even when I was rejected, I'd be okay.	▪ Leading/ mentoring peers ▪ Changes for the better because of adverse experience ▪ Realized need for self-improvement ▪ Challenges make people stronger ▪ Became accountable and responsible ▪ Developed spiritual connection	Making Something Good from Adverse Experience
Autonomy ▪ Stability ▪ Success ▪ Confidence ▪ Continuing education and training ▪ Meaningful work ▪ Getting promotions ▪ Tech-savvy ▪ Proving to myself ▪ I keep challenging myself ▪ Quality of life ▪ Improving abilities ▪ Voting ▪ Personal vision or mission ▪ Quality of life ▪ Be the Turtle instead of the Hare ▪ Pay my bills ▪ You like what you're doing ▪ Work is satisfying ▪ Work is rewarding ▪ I want more than to just be a worker ▪ Continuing self-improvement ▪ When I found out what they were doing, I really wanted to work here ▪ , And those are the moments that to me are priceless-It's just not about the pay ▪ I'm making connections – networking in the community ▪ My vision/mission for serving people and helping people find autonomy and self-worth.	▪ Autonomy and quality of life ▪ Being a productive citizen ▪ Taking on challenges, not avoiding ▪ Feeling self-confident ▪ Life-long learning ▪ Doing meaningful work	Purposeful Living

Note: A detailed Code Book portrays my thematic analysis process in Appendix G: Code Book.

Coding the fifth of my six transcripts, I noted that I had identified the six overarching themes, no new categories or themes were emerging, and I had reached data saturation. A detailed Code Book portraying the number of codes I counted per case and theme is available in Appendix G: Code Book.

Results

Using qualitative multiple case study methodology, I generated knowledge about six unique human experience cases linked closely to context and setting (Nowell et al., 2017). My case study results chronicle the pathways taken by six formerly incarcerated citizens who obtained sustainable wage employment after incarceration. I display my results first as six summarized stories in a section called Case Profiles, highlighting my findings within each case. Then, I give meaning to the patterns I discovered and connections I made between the cases by uniting various truths with coherent themes (Nowell et al., 2017; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Finally, I present my results in sections organized by my six overarching themes.

In this section, I reported my results using interpreted and paraphrased descriptions of data I gathered. I also used direct quotations that best capture the genuine essence of a participant's perceptions or the predominance of a theme (Brink, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). I interpreted the multiple realities shared in the rich subjective data from each case and the variety of context-specific responses to my interview questions separately and then collectively to answer my research question (Brink, 2018; Yin, 2018). I used only fictional pseudonyms I selected in this report.

Table 4

Summary of Sustainable Wage Jobs and Filtered Employer Descriptions

Job description	Employer description	Summary of pathway	How long to sustainable wages?
Landscaping supervisor	Private for-profit landscaping company	Halfway house > Temp job > Job through family > Online search > Honest about conviction > Employer appreciated honesty/saw potential > Promotion to supervisor > Feels satisfied, rewarded, and blessed.	3 years
Job developer	Nonprofit employment agency for justice-involved citizens	Background as an educator > Discovered enjoyment mentoring peers inside > Mentored peers at workforce center after release > Became stronger going through the stressful justice process > Hired in current job mentoring others > Hoping for future growth opportunities > Feels valued and confident in doing the work he was "called to do."	100 days
Workforce agency job coach/intake specialist	Nonprofit employment agency for justice-involved citizens	Took every job/education opportunity available over 25 years incarcerated > Felt prepared for competitive job market after "the ultimate interview" with Board of Parole > Used employment services at transitional housing and public library for computer access after release > Searched and applied for jobs online > Rejected twice > Right place, right time and prepared > Obtained his sustainable wage job > Promoted to current job in a new agency > Feels his work is meaningful because of the accomplishments of the people he assists.	75 days
Workforce agency site supervisor	Nonprofit employment agency for justice-involved citizens	Retired military > Already held master's degree > Decided new career path in nonprofit work while incarcerated > Graduate school full-time > Online search > Only 1 feasible result due to stigmatized conviction > Applied on website > Prepared for interview > Emailed when no response > Phone interview > In-person interview > Accepted in "as-needed" position that provides sustainable income > Feels his personal mission is to help others find autonomy and self-worth.	1 year
Placement specialist	Government-sponsored Behavioral Health call center	Mandated substance abuse treatment halfway house had Job Readiness class > Hired and worked at that same treatment facility for 7 years, but could not get a promotion > Took a new job with $3/hour pay cut, but felt valued by new employer > Also worked part-time work-study at college so income was higher than before > When school closed, worked for an employment agency helping justice-involved people > Granted a pardon which opened the door to her current job as she prepares for master's level internship in behavioral health > Feels her lived experience is an asset in her work.	12 years
Workforce agency site director	Nonprofit employment agency for justice-involved citizens	Began volunteering with a reentry program for formerly incarcerated people > Attended trainings and meetings > Kept seeing the director of the agency where she hoped to work > Learned more about the organization > Was persistent in reaching out to that agency for a job opportunity > Built a relationship with the director who helped her network > "Stalked" the director until there was an opening > Began at ground level and has been promoted to directorship > Feels enjoyment helping others move through their personal journeys in life and accomplish their goals.	3 years

Case Profiles

In this section, I present a filtered overview of each participant's demographic information and prison to employment history to provide a context for discussing my research cases. I disguised participants' identities, geographic location, and the names of the employers. Doing so allowed me to report my findings using verbatim quotations and detailed descriptions of individual perspectives and experiences without jeopardizing confidentiality. Participants selected aliases for use in place of given names to protect their identities throughout this research. After completing my cross-case analysis, I then change the self-selected pseudonyms to aliases of my choosing to further protect participants' anonymity. Using pseudonyms allowed me to keep a human touch while protecting individual privacy. Additionally, I elected not to disclose cities or states in which participants reside. I instead wrote this report using broad general descriptions of U.S. geographic regions.

Elaine

Elaine is a Black female who served five years in a state prison facility and believes the lived experience has guided her to a career helping others. Since her justice involvement, Elaine emphasized her efforts to build her self-confidence and professional skillset and set high personal standards to match her values. She said she believes this is how she has demonstrated her worth and overcome social stigma as a barrier to employment. Upon release from incarceration, Elaine achieved her associate's and bachelor's degrees and is currently completing an internship for her master's degree and licensing as a mental health clinician.

Elaine reported that, when she was in prison, there were no vocational programs offered. She added that "nobody even cared if we had books [for self-improvement]," so going to college was a high priority career development goal when she was released. Elaine repeatedly expressed gratitude for having already earned a high school diploma but voiced her belief that a high school education was not enough to find sustainable wage employment. Elaine said she was parole-mandated to attend a Job Readiness class at a halfway house for substance abuse treatment after prison. She utilized services at an employment agency after release from incarceration. She added that she also used an old computer at her mother's house and a computer at the public library to search for work.

Elaine reported that it took her 12 years after prison release to obtain what she considered sustainable wage employment. She added that her pathway to her current position involved working jobs in which she felt underpaid and undervalued because of her past.

Elaine listed "tenacity, determination, and not giving up" as personal strengths that she relied on when looking for work. She added "fortitude" as a strength and defined the term as "having courage in spite of" [the barriers and fear].

Zora

Zora is a Black female who was incarcerated for one year in federal prison following what she described as a high-profile criminal case covered by media across the country. Because returning to her career in the same professional field was not an option and "employers were apprehensive about attaching their name to my name," Zora said she purposefully drew from her strengths and leadership experience when creating a path

to a new career. However, although she had leadership experience and held professional credentials, Zora admitted that she did not feel emotionally ready to start a new career when released from incarceration. She explained, “It [the criminal conviction] upset my whole life trajectory. I was highly embarrassed and traumatized [by the conviction and incarceration experience].”

According to Zora, the vocational services in the federal prison where she was confined were “total garbage.” She explained that although she realized her standards for education and training programs were high because of the “full breadth of life” she had experienced in the past, most of the available classes were instructed by other inmates, without modern supplies, and they were very outdated. In prison, Zora decided to help others improve vocational readiness by teaching some of the courses herself.

Zora said her path to obtaining sustainable wage employment started with her acceptance that her felony conviction would prohibit her from returning to her former career field. She explained that she came to realize that she would have to become humble and restart a career in “a job that did not provide income anywhere near” what she had earned in the past. Zora reported that she started as a job coach and became a program director, earning sustainable wages, about three years after prison release. She said she has learned how to redirect her skills and become comfortable using her lived experience to help others obtain employment after incarceration.

Zora identified her strengths as perseverance and keeping her life organized around her new purpose.

Daniel

Daniel is a White male who served four years in state prison. While incarcerated, Daniel said he became aware that he had had advantages and opportunities in life that other people had not had.

Daniel reported that, while there were some skill training programs in the state prison facility, they were not well-administered and often discontinued abruptly. While Daniel was in prison, he said there was a pilot program offering college courses and because he already had a college degree, he became a mentor for others. He said he tutored academic work and led men's groups on self-fulfillment and working toward goals. Daniel felt this experience helped him prepare for his current job.

Daniel discussed some of the specific employment challenges he faced. He said that his conviction record, together with the national registry and mandatory five-year intensive post-release community supervision, eliminated any chances for him to work in the profession he had planned. Daniel said that through a workforce agency in his community after prison, he learned how to talk about his conviction and find felon-friendly agencies that hire people with criminal backgrounds. Throughout his incarceration and later the workforce program, Daniel said he realized his passion for helping his peers and developed his new career goals. He said it took 100 days after prison release to obtain his job.

Daniel identified one of his strengths as tenacity. He also said he considers being able to find the value in other people and connect with people who have a positive outlook as personal strengths.

Juan

Juan is a Hispanic male who, at 19 years old, went to state prison on a 30-year-to-life sentence. After living for almost 25 years in various state prison facilities, the parole board found Juan suitable for returning to society. He said that society had changed a lot during his quarter-century incarceration, but so had he, and for the better. Juan took advantage of work opportunities throughout his years of imprisonment. He said he believed that every job he worked helped him prepare for his reentry success. For example, Juan noted he washed pots and pans, served meals, did yard work, aided teachers, and served as a clerk for administrative staff.

Juan testified that some state prison facilities offered vocational services, but they were typically outdated. He said, for him, the most valuable opportunities were the college programs. In addition to taking advantage of prison work opportunities, Juan reported that he earned three associate's degrees in business, social and behavioral sciences, and American history. Additionally, Juan said he took the advice of a correctional officer who suggested that he take any technology classes he had a chance to take because computers would be the future. He enrolled in courses to learn to use the Microsoft Office software and found opportunities to use computers in some of his office jobs. However, because using the internet was not allowed in prison, Juan said email and web-based applications were new to him when he was released, making the modern-day online job search and application process feel overwhelming.

Juan shared that the state parole board mandated that he reintegrate into society, after nearly 25 years behind bars, using a transitional housing program. He reported that

he used the public library to learn how to use email and search and apply for jobs online. Juan said because of the work he did to prepare for reentry while incarcerated, together with "being in the right place at the right time," he obtained sustainable wage employment about 75 days after prison release. Juan said he used to say he was lucky, but a loved one told him to give himself more credit for stepping up to challenges, saying, "luck is where preparedness and opportunity meet."

Juan said good communication skills and remaining teachable are personal strengths that have helped him in the workforce.

Mark

Mark is a White male residing in a suburban neighborhood in the west. He served nine and one-half years in federal prison. While incarcerated, Mark said he made his plan to obtain work with a nonprofit organization or start an agency of his own to help other justice-involved people achieve autonomy after prison. Mark had earned two master's degrees before being sent to prison. However, even with his graduate degrees, he admitted that he "might have been just a little overconfident" about his abilities to find work after prison. He reported that his type of conviction limited his employment opportunities in many professional fields.

Mark said he had the opportunity to work in prison and earn a Department of Labor certification as a wood machinist. However, as a profession, Mark noted that woodworking did not align with his mission to help other justice-involved people. Mark said parole-mandated computer monitoring also impacted many of his employment decisions and eliminated his opportunities for highly skilled technical jobs. For example,

Mark said he could not apply for work using his bookkeeping skills because he could not use computers or connect to the internet. Additionally, Mark said parole prohibited him from using the internet, so he had to search for jobs using offline listings at a workforce agency. He said he obtained what he considers sustainable wage, meaningful employment about one year after prison release.

Mark identified his strengths as attention to detail and conscientiousness. He said he shows up to work on time and does not dabble, but instead works hard to complete all his duties with efficiency.

Tom

Tom is a White male who spent four and one-half years in a state prison facility administered by a private prison agency. Tom said that he came from a well-educated and privileged family but became addicted to drugs and a drug-hustling lifestyle in his youth. He explained that hustling became a way to make good money fast but resulted in life problems and felony convictions before he was 18 years old. Tom described his final period of incarceration as a humbling experience. He said he used his time to reflect on "what was real and meaningful" and about the kind of man he wanted to be.

Tom said there were no vocational services or programs at the private prison facility in which he resided. He said, "There was nothing in there." However, he noted that he took advantage of an opportunity to participate in a substance abuse therapeutic community program and victim impact program. In these programs, he said he learned to take responsibility for his choices and acknowledge that there were victims of the crimes he had previously justified as harmless to large corporations. Tom said he felt "blessed"

because his counselor guided him to a halfway house affiliated with an employment agency. He said he had a temporary job within one week of release from incarceration.

Tom called finding sustainable wage employment, “a 3-year ordeal.” He explained that he had to humble himself and take help from others to get by while he developed a legitimate career. When looking for permanent work, he said he ran into employment challenges due to his criminal background. Tom noted the employer who eventually hired him did so because he was honest about his criminal background before being asked. He said they could sense how serious he was about being more than just an average worker.

Tom identified his strengths as having a strong work ethic and striving to lead others instead of just being a worker.

Vocational Programs and Data Sources

My research question was how, if at all, have formerly incarcerated citizens used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment? I asked case participants to describe the education and work opportunities available during incarceration and in their communities after release. I attempted to verify subjective data about the available in-custody and community vocational services each participant identified. Table 5 depicts a comparison of pre-and post-release vocational programs participants identified as available or lacking and information I gained by exploring archival data found on agency websites.

Table 5

Table of Supporting Public Records

	Vocational services opportunities identified by participant		Vocational services opportunities verified	
Time served	Opportunities at correctional facilities	Opportunities in community	Opportunities at correctional facilities	Opportunities in community
4.5 years private state prison	None. "There weren't any [vocational program opportunities] in there."	Halfway house was affiliated with temporary job placement service.	Verified using the private prison agency website - no vocational services.	Verified halfway house and temporary service using internet websites.
4 years federal prison	Negative perception. Some training available but programs lacked fidelity. Pilot program for college courses.	Community workforce development program.	Verified using state's Department of Corrections website.	Verified using regional workforce websites.
25 years state prison	Some facilities. Usually outdated. Opportunities for prison "work". computer classes & Microsoft Office. Also 3 associate's degrees.	Mandated program workforce center at transitional housing. Job opportunities, trainings such as OSHA. Public library free computers.	Verified vocational services and job opportunities in some facilities using state Department of Corrections website.	Verified state Board of Parole uses transitional housing programs with workforce development services. Public library has a free computer lab
9.5 years federal prison	Took a program for federal Department of Labor certification as wood machinist. *7 Habits on the Inside*.	Used a local workforce website and had a career coach through veterans' services.	Verified both programs using the Federal Bureau of Prisons Directory of National Programs.	Verified using regional vocational services websites.
5 years state prison	None. "They didn't offer [vocational programs]. That's not their job. They could care less about your education or work."	Mandated halfway house Job Readiness program. Public library. Reentry services network agency.	Using state Department of Corrections records, I verified that there were no vocational services in the facility.	Verified halfway house, Job Readiness class, and reentry services network agency using internet websites.
1 year federal prison	"Can I just be candid? Total garbage." Most of the available classes were taught by other inmates and outdated. No computers.	Workforce service specifically for justice impacted. Resumes, cover letters, how to discuss conviction with employers.	Verified using the Federal Bureau of Prisons Directory Unable to verify whether programs are instructed by volunteers or inmates	Verified using websites.

Thematic Analysis Results

In this section, I presented my results of the cross-analysis process I used to combine 33 broad groupings, of hundreds of codes, from six separate cases, into six predominant themes: *redemption*, *humility*, *gratitude*, *making something good from adverse experiences, perseverance, and purposeful living.* As primary elements of personal choice and perspectives across the cases, these six overarching themes encompass all codes I assigned in my data analysis process (Datu et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). I determined that I had reached data saturation because sampling more cases would not likely have resulted in the emergence of additional themes (Datu et al., 2018; Yin, 2018).

Table 6

Code Counts by Case and Theme

Redemption	Humility	Gratitude	Making good	Perseverance	Purposeful living	Total
82	76	34	51	42	43	**328**
85	62	79	58	78	46	**408**
82	66	65	68	49	61	**391**
37	49	31	28	33	32	**210**
82	73	67	51	39	32	**344**
58	55	40	39	44	34	**270**
426	**381**	**316**	**295**	**285**	**248**	**1,951**

Theme 1: Redemption

For my research study, the theme of *redemption* embodied whole-person recovery from the crime-conviction-incarceration experience. Redemption in this study referred to physical, mental, financial, social, and spiritual aspects of regaining autonomy and well-being after conviction. Examples of concepts encompassed in this theme are: finding chances to prove one's worth through felon-friendly workforce agencies and employers,

recapturing a feeling of value as a person, forgiving oneself, and proving one's value to society. For my study, redemption was not religion-focused, although one participant used the term when referring to religious beliefs. Redemption was the most frequently coded theme in my study. I tallied 426 expressions of ideas related to redemption among the six cases. Elaine said,

> It's been a long road, but I refused to believe I had nothing to give this world just because I had been convicted of felonies. Even after all these years, I need to prove to myself that I'm the person that I knew I always was, the one God knew I always was the one my mother knew I always was. I am not that person I was at 19 years old. I am a brand-new person, and I have a gift to give.

Tom told me about "getting in on the ground level and working hard to prove myself." He explained that he was grateful for an employer who gave him a chance to prove his worth,

> He understood I was a serious player, and what I was saying was not a joke, and I was hungry [for work]. He said, "You're 54, and normally I wouldn't hire you, but I saw you have the potential to be more than just what we're hiring for. You could grow the company."

Daniel explained,

> I have a highly stigmatized conviction. If I were to think too much about the shame and how people are looking at me, I would fail. But in focusing on the things I do bring and finding value in the person I want to be, I've been able to persevere through a lot of dire circumstances.

Mark related to similar challenges, “I had to find an employer to look beyond my conviction, and they would get an employee who is high-performing, high-functioning, and would do a good job for them.” Mark also talked about redeeming himself by continually growing and learning,

> Because of the stigma related to my conviction, I had to meet with a board at the university to be allowed to go to school there. They wanted to make sure I wasn’t going to hurt people. I’m going to finish this degree. That’s my vision for the future. Finishing this degree is the first step to having credibility.

Juan explained that at some point in time during his 30-year-to-life sentence, he made a commitment to redeem himself, “No matter if I ever got out of prison or not, I was going to be successful.” Juan reported the parole board rejected his application twice before granting him another chance at life and freedom. He explained that the parole hearings helped him prepare for the interviews and rejections he later faced when trying to find work in society. Juan said,

> I went before the board of parole hearings three times. And when I was found suitable for parole and told that I was no longer a risk to society and I was going to be given another opportunity at life and freedom, I knew that that was like the ultimate interview. And then I could do any interview from that point forward.

Zora spoke specifically of redemption as regaining one’s value in life. She described her experience,

> What I do has value. I enjoy seeing people move through their own personal journey, whether it’s a person like me from having a great career, having this dip,

> and then moving to redemption. So, it's the same thing with people who are returning home from incarceration. Cause I'm one of those people, of course. They had something going before they left, then there's this big lull; they may have been gone for a few years, one year, or 42 years. I have a participant who was gone 42 years and eight months. He reminds me all the time that he's missed so much [of life]. So now, to follow him, and assist him, and be part of his journey to redemption, however that looks in his life, is rewarding for me.

Theme 2: Humility

Using cross-case thematic analysis, I identified *humility* as an overwhelming sentiment shared in all six cases. I tallied 381 occurrences of expressions related to humility as an essential sentiment or attitude for reentry success. I classified participants' words as expressions of humility based upon my interpretation of a) sentiment related to a lack of egotism, b) recognizing individual abilities and limitations as human beings, c) statements about all people having qualities and shortcomings, or d) belief that people need other people to succeed. My participants told me that obtaining autonomy and well-being after prison required asking for, accepting, and recognizing help from someone or something besides oneself. Daniel shared that,

> I lived for four years with individuals from a wide array of the social spectrum. It was both humbling and insightful. It helped me see the world differently and be able to humble myself to do what I'm doing to help others reenter the workforce.

All six participants mentioned recognizing their limitations and learning not to allow fear of ridicule or stigma related to criminal conviction to prevent them from

asking for help to achieve success. Mark said he had 20 years of leadership experience and had earned two master's degrees before his felony conviction. He repeatedly recognized his powerlessness over the restrictions placed on his employment prospects. Mark said, "I used a local workforce website and a veterans' services organization. I had to pare down my resume because I was overqualified for pretty much all the jobs I applied for." In a message to other justice-involved people, Mark emphasized, "The barriers are real and are very strong. They cut me down many times and made it [finding work] very discouraging."

Mark and Zora told me about their plans to use the graduate degrees, credentials, leadership skills, and employment networking experiences they had before prison to obtain sustainable work after release. However, both also described humbling setbacks in their job-seeking efforts related to overpowering social stigma and work restrictions because of their felony convictions.

Juan discussed having a parole mandate to attend a meeting where a woman was giving out free library cards. He said, "who doesn't like free anything and take advantage of it, right?" He described how he discovered "the public library was like a safe-haven after 25 years inside. . . . like a museum where I could go and get lost." Juan said he then found a computer room where "I completed my very first online job application."

Zora mentioned feeling shame related to her conviction throughout our interview, but each time acknowledged her growing humility. She spoke about learning to let go of the emotional baggage she carried after her "high-profile case was broadcast nationally on television and social media." Admitting she is not yet entirely over feeling

embarrassed, Zora described how she humbled herself in prison and took classes taught by other inmates who did not have her education, credentials, or experience presenting information to others. After release, Zora participated in a nonprofit vocational program where she learned from a much younger professional how to "share my conviction statement" with potential employers. She said she had no idea that organizations existed that trained people to explain their felony convictions to employers while focusing on their strengths. Zora admitted, "I thought I knew everything [about career development], and I found out I didn't." Later, she said she decided to work for that organization and teach other justice-involved people how to "have that hard conversation."

Talking about beginning her new career, Zora shared,

> I didn't initially feel comfortable sharing my story and experience with the rest of the staff because I felt I would be judged. Come to find out, everybody in the office was like, "Oh well, I've got a story too! And I've got a story too! And I have a story!" So, I'm like, Oh. Okay. Well then, I'm home.

Elaine also discussed feeling embarrassed because she was accepted to a college program but had no computer or internet. However, she said she put aside her feelings of shame and told the campus pastor about her predicament,

> A literacy helper let me borrow a laptop. He had IT [Information Technology staff] set it up for me and said, 'I hope you do well. Let us know how you're doing.' And, they gave me money to pay for internet service.

Tom emphasized humility, saying, "being incarcerated, you realize how little you need to survive. It's been a humbling experience." He later discussed humility when

describing life at a halfway house and how he had to accept help from his ex-wife and friends to get back on his feet. Tom had a suggestion for others, “Just be the person that accepts the help and grows from it and gives back, and you'll be blessed.”

Theme 3: Gratitude

In my cross-case analysis, I identified similar expressions of participant’s *gratitude,* often related to humility. Some examples of gratitude were thankfulness for felon-friendly employers willing to give people a chance, appreciation for a changed perspective on life, and the “blessings” of personal advantages and strengths, educational and workforce opportunities, or family support. Throughout the interviews, all six of my cases repeatedly pronounced gratitude for the help they received from others and good things that happened because of divine intervention, fate, or luck. I coded 316 counts of expressed gratitude across the six cases.

Juan talked about the gratitude he felt to God and the parole board for “just having a second chance at freedom.” He explained that being paroled was a genuine blessing for him and not a guarantee because his sentence had been 30-years to life. He voiced gratitude for things many people take for granted, such as “I cherish the time I have to use computers” and “being able to walk around, just exploring freedom and all the changes after almost 25 years.”

Juan repeatedly noted his good fortune for the support he had throughout his incarceration that resulted in his changed perspective on life. As described, he went into prison at 19 years old. He told me his large family supported him over the decades of incarceration and “instilled good values and kept me kind of in touch with reality.”

Additionally, despite his dire circumstances, Juan said he was grateful for the peers in prison and correctional staff who encouraged his personal growth. He explained,

> I'm fortunate. Learning has come easy to me. I love learning. But, at one time, I didn't realize the potential I had to learn. I considered myself a dummy. I thought I couldn't learn because I didn't believe in myself. And it wasn't till other people would tell me, "Man, you're good at this. You're good at that." My self-esteem flourished, and my self-worth, and my desire to grow and help others grow. And that, to me, has been what allowed me to succeed and move forward and thrive here after incarceration.

Daniel described his changed perspective on life since incarceration contributed to his gratefulness for things others may not appreciate the same way,

> Prior to my felony conviction, I had never made more than $20,000 a year. The starting wage for this position [his current job] was approximately $40,000. So, while others in a similar position might say they're not making enough, I was fortunate to see the world through a different lens and be thankful.

Tom repeatedly expressed gratitude for the people and events that helped him change his perspective on life. "I've been blessed in a lot of ways more than other people." He said, "I'm not stupid. I just made stupid choices sometimes." He discussed his opportunities to develop structure and a spiritual relationship for his life while incarcerated and later in a halfway house program. Tom emphasized the priority he gives to encouraging younger men away from the street life and the "suffering and pain that goes with that lifestyle." He said he is fortunate that his work as a supervisor is

meaningful, not just because of the pay but because he can pay his bills and live his life without a criminal element.

Elaine spoke of gratitude, appreciation, and blessings repeatedly while answering my interview questions. For example, Elaine said,

> I am very grateful. This [employment success] is not by accident. My prayer was simple, "God, I don't need to be rich, but can you please provide enough that I can take care of myself?" These are gifts: the fact that I can pay for my car and my insurance and my apartment, and I have things in here that I want and not only what I need. I even started a business. I prayed about that. I know nothing about business, and it's doing very well. He's [God's] a provider.

All six participants described the significance of finding felon-friendly employers who would give them a chance to work based on their skills and not reject them as employees because of their felony convictions. Zora, an administrator in her professional field before incarceration, said she was not having good luck finding work after federal prison. She said she obtained her first job after incarceration through "an inclusive temporary hiring agency." She added that she was grateful for the chance to do her part to bring some income back into her family. Zora said she later obtained an entry-level job with a reentry-focused employment agency where the director "had an affinity for hiring people with the lived experience of being justice-impacted." She said she is fortunate because her employer has allowed her to move up quickly, and within one year, she has moved into a directorship.

Mark said he realized there would be some social stigma to contend with after conviction, but he did not know how hard it would be for a person with his education, skills, and experience to find a job. Because of his conviction, Mark said there were added burdens for employers to consider, such as having their computers monitored or even confiscated for just being affiliated with someone who had his type of conviction. Mark said he is grateful for finding an agency willing to hire him in a job that matched his mission to help others.

Tom described his pathway to employment with gratitude for finding an employer willing to give him a chance. He said his employer appreciated his honesty when he told the truth about his criminal background. He also noted, "I'm blessed that the job market was extremely strong when I was released, which enabled me to quickly find a job until I could get to the job that I needed to get, which is where I'm at now." Tom also discussed his "good fortune" related to having sustainable wage work during the pandemic economy shutdown,

> So, it's just as if this Covid [coronavirus pandemic] thing's not happening. What I do is essential business, in a weird way. It's like the grass always grows, and things need to be maintained. So, I'm fortunate. I'm kind of content here. I'm happy that things are okay.

Theme 4: Making Something Good from Adverse Experience

In my study, all six case participants made deliberate choices to focus on what Tom called "all the blessings" that resulted from the adverse experiences of justice involvement and take whatever actions were necessary to make a better future. In each of

the six cases, participants also described transforming their outlooks on life by decisively opting to learn lessons from their mistakes, find opportunities to grow from challenges, help others, and give something back to society. Across the cases, I tallied expressions related to *making something good from the adverse experience* 295 times.

Sentenced to 30-years-to-life, Juan said he chose to make the best of his bad circumstances. He said that making purposeful efforts to be good and do good is what he was known for on the inside, amid the negativity of life in state prison.

> Inside, that's what I was committed to. And I worked hard at it, hard to develop programs within the prison, hard to build relationships. I worked hard to keep the peace and keep everybody inclusive and break the cycle of violence and discrimination and racism that exists behind the walls, you know? And so I worked very hard, and that helped me develop my purpose in who I am.

Juan also repeatedly noted that he took advantage of all self-improvement opportunities he could while he was in prison, despite the life sentence that meant he might never get out. Juan talked specifically about taking advantage of every opportunity he had to work different jobs in prison. He said,

> I believe that all of the jobs I did, from washing pots to where I was working alongside staff, prepared me for where I am today. In different ways, they helped me develop confidence in knowing what I can accomplish and that I can hold a job. So, knowing that I can do a number of things, the most basic to more complex, allowed me to be able to go with confidence into an interview and pretty much sell myself and demonstrate that I'm an asset to a company.

Zora shared that the vocational services in her prison were facilitated by other inmates using only outdated and very basic information. She said, for instance, in one outdated business class taught by inmates who had already taken it, they used obsolete typewriters to type resumes. But Zora took the class, nonetheless. Because of her prior education and career experience, she knew the importance of a professional-looking resume uploaded to an employment website for getting noticed in the competitive job market. Zora said that in prison, "everybody has a hustle, and my hustle was a free service." She explained that with her sister's assistance on the outside, she helped other women convert the typewriter-typed resumes they created into updated Microsoft Word documents they could access after release.

Mark discussed finding the value in the adverse experience of a felony conviction. He had two master's degrees and was retired from a leadership role in a career before his "life trajectory was changed" by his felony conviction. While incarcerated for nine and one-half years, Mark said he developed a new personal mission related to helping other people identify their values and goals that could lead them to succeed after incarceration.

> I kept seeing people coming back into prison who did not have a plan [for finding employment]. I would hear about their struggles. Because of that, I was determined that when I got out, I would either find a nonprofit or start one to help formerly incarcerated individuals find employment, reunite with their families, and gain education or other life skills.

Elaine described being "honestly scared to death [when released from prison]. I didn't think anyone would hire me at all." She said she learned to research employer

organizations to determine if they hired people with felony convictions before spending time on job applications. After several employment rejections, Elaine told me she discovered careers in which her lived experiences could be assets and not faults,

> After a while, I would apply with places where I knew my background would be a benefit, like a substance abuse treatment center and places like that. Because, if you're a person in recovery, you speak the language, so you're a benefit. And, nobody judged me based on my past.

Daniel talked about trying to develop a pathway to productive citizenry while he was in prison through self-improvement and planning a future career,

> I read 300 books in four years, and most of them were nonfiction and self-improvement. One of the things that I specifically focused on, which I thought I would be able to get a job in was water quality management. That was my intention to study water reclamation and work for a public utility in cleaning water. I figured it would be a way for me to give back while also having some job stability.

However, after release from incarceration, Daniel learned he was ineligible for work with a public utility because of mandated restrictions due to his conviction. He said he made use of his in-prison discovery that he was good at mentoring his peers and, instead, became a job developer helping justice-involved citizens find employment.

Tom discussed making good from his incarceration experience numerous times. Although he said there were no vocational services in his prison facility, he talked about how in-custody substance abuse and victim impact programs helped him learn about

himself and his connection to others. After release, Tom focused on developing his spirituality and learned the importance of offering hope to others in a faith-based halfway house program. In his job as a supervisor, he said, “I’ve got younger guys up under me that I’m able to mentor who dibble and dabble in this and that [drugs and associated lifestyle], and I’m trying to encourage them to see the outcome of that, eventually.”

Zora said she had been a well-known and respected professional in her community before incarceration. In a post-release workforce development program for justice-involved people, Zora highlighted the opportunities she had to discover a new career passion. Zora said she learned “new tricks of the trade” from a younger woman she called “an amazing person. . . . a Little Dynamo.” Zora noted that she not only learned new tools for finding sustainable, meaningful jobs and presenting a personal brand on employment-related websites, but she discovered her path to developing a new, gratifying career teaching those skills to others.

All six participants noted they developed greater satisfaction in helping other people as a result of their conviction and incarceration experience.

Theme 5: Perseverance

In this study, the theme of *perseverance* encompassed participant expressions related to hard work, effortful persistence, and a determination to succeed despite challenges and fear. I coded 285 expressions of participants’ determination to obtain employment that could lead to autonomy and well-being across the six cases. Four of my six study participants listed the term “perseverance” when answering my interview question about the personal strengths they used to overcome employment barriers. The

word *perseverance* or a related idiom was used by all six of the case participants when describing the process of obtaining sustainable employment after prison.

Tom declared, “I was extremely determined to get out and rebuild my life.” However, he said the background check that reveals a criminal history to employers was a challenging barrier for him,

> That [background check] was discouraging but understandable. I realized I just had to focus on doing something else until the time comes, when the opportunity presents itself, where being a convicted felon is not that big of a deal.

He added that “what convictions closed the door on, my hard work and perseverance will hopefully overcome.”

Elaine emphasized “tenacity” as an essential strength when developing a career after conviction, “Tenacity. I would be determined. I’m just not going to fold too easily. I’m going to keep going. I may not get this job, like it might not be right now, but I’ll be back.” Elaine shared that, “I made no excuses. Before I had a car, I used to ride a bus to drop off resumes, back then. I did what I had to do.” Elaine emphasized the importance of not giving up trying to find sustainable wage employment over the years while working in jobs that did not pay well. Elaine said, “It took fortitude, having courage in spite of [rejection and stigma]. It took getting up the next day knowing, okay, yesterday didn’t work out so well so, let’s try this again today.”

Daniel used a metaphor referring to employment barriers like walls or mountains in describing perseverance,

> I wouldn't say tenacity, but like a certain dumb persistence in that if I were to stop and analyze the barriers that I faced, I wouldn't step forward. I wouldn't attempt to climb that wall or that mountain [apply and interview for a job he wanted].

Mark, who had two master's degrees and a career in leadership before conviction, said,

> I realized that there would be stigma and barriers to my employment. But I didn't recognize how much my conviction was going to impact my ability to get work or how a person with my skills and expertise has had to struggle to find work.

Mark also talked about the systemic issues related to employment barriers for justice-involved people that result in high recidivism numbers. He emphasized, "it's not easy" to obtain sustainable wage work after a felony conviction. Mark explained,

> If I wasn't a person who wanted to keep pushing and wanting to make things happen, [he might have ended up back in prison]. I could see why two-thirds of the people who come out of prison return [in the United States]. I can understand why, because they look at it and go, "this is BS, and I'm just gonna go back where it's easier" type of thing.

Juan talked about working hard to improve his circumstances throughout his interview. He recognized the efforts he made to become a better man, despite his life sentence to prison and his adverse surroundings,

> Had I not taken the initiative to take advantage of the trainings provided to me, I wouldn't have been in that situation [prepared for the unexpected conversation that turned into a job interview and ultimately his job]. . . . Just to get out of

> prison, as a life term inmate, I had to go before our parole board three times. I was rejected twice by parole before I was found suitable. So that in itself helped me in society because I knew that I was going to encounter rejection, but I was okay because even though I had been rejected twice, I had succeeded [in gaining freedom]. And I was able and prepared to come out to society and not be intimidated by the interview process and not be intimidated by asking for a job.

Zora also recognized that perseverance in finding employment was essential after being rejected in interviews because of a criminal background check,

> That rejection piece for me initially was very, very tough because I'm like, "What do you mean I'm no longer qualified? You wanted to hire me five minutes ago." You have to be able to not internalize the rejection and persevere through, understanding that people's funding is attached to who they hire. And their implicit biases are attached to who they hire. So, just being able to handle that on a regular and consistent basis [is crucial] as you're searching for employment.

Zora specifically said she had to have perseverance, as well as "some tough skin." She said she had to learn quickly "not to internalize rejection and to persevere through by giving my all to searching for work I could be passionate about." Zora also talked about her focus on the importance of setting priorities and "keeping my life organized after incarceration." When she discovered the felon-friendly agency with which she is now employed, Zora said she began persistently checking in with the director about a job opening. She joked, "I got my job through stalking!"

I asked interview questions about barriers to employment and personal strengths used to overcome them. All six participants in my study revealed their paths to careers were, in different ways, altered by felony conviction and incarceration. All six participants discussed barriers to employment and hardships encountered when reentering society after incarceration. All six participants also highlighted an ability to overcome challenges by working hard to reach goals, not giving up after rejection, and changing course or trying a new career path when confronted by barriers. Table 7 compares examples of how each participant described the barriers to employment and the personal strengths they called on to overcome the obstacles.

Table 7

Barriers to Employment and Strengths Used to Overcome Barriers

Barriers Code words and phrases	Code count	Strengths Code words and phrases	Code count
Stumbling stone ▪ it was difficult ▪ felony convictions ▪ felonies since before I was 18 ▪ criminal history ▪ background check ▪ never had the right to vote ▪ lost everything ▪ pain and suffering from addiction ▪ some have never had a job ▪ wasted time ▪ regrets ▪ stressful lifestyle ▪ rejection despite qualifications ▪ discouraging ▪ shame ▪ no access to computer ▪ no services in prison ▪ nothing in there.	24	Strong work ethic ▪ desire to excel ▪ don't just settle ▪ hard work ▪ took the initiative ▪ persistence ▪ perseverance ▪ be a leader ▪ set an example ▪ mentor ▪ show a better way ▪ strong interview skills ▪ self-improvement ▪ set personal milestone ▪ determined to rebuild my life ▪ strengths ▪ abilities ▪ intelligence ▪ prior experience and training ▪ comfortable with technology ▪ prepared ▪ ready to work ▪ job market was extremely strong ▪ essential job ▪ in this business before ▪ come from a really strong, educated family ▪ picked up pertinent information ▪ went to college ▪ was a business owner.	50
Difficulty finding employment ▪ stigma ▪ stigmatized-offense ▪ registry and public notification ▪ unprepared ▪ rejection ▪ shame ▪ low confidence ▪ felony conviction ▪ criminal history ▪ background check ▪ over 550 collateral consequences related to conviction ▪ prison programs outdated ▪ programs set people up to fail ▪ stress ▪ regret ▪ rejected despite qualifications ▪ not an option ▪ application didn't go well ▪ discouraging ▪ not legally able because of offense ▪ conviction highly stigmatized ▪ employers did not want to be associated ▪ nobody wanted to be liable ▪ more intensive supervision ▪ mandatory 5-years post-release control ▪ are we citizens?	41	Job readiness ▪ I own the skills I already had ▪ strong resource network ▪ ability to communicate using online resources ▪ aware of technology options ▪ up to date with available technology ▪ prior experience and training ▪ taking initiative ▪ background in education ▪ prior experience ▪ skill ▪ strengths ▪ abilities ▪ intelligence ▪ tenacity ▪ a certain dumb persistence ▪ focusing on the things I do bring ▪ I've been able to persevere through dire circumstances ▪ knowing and connecting with positive people.	27
Went into prison in 1994-email and computers with internet were new to me ▪ had never done online application ▪ felt kind of overwhelming ▪ at some facilities programs were lacking or outdated ▪ felony conviction is a huge obstacle ▪ rejected by Parole Board twice ▪ the application and interview process was intimidating-I had only done basic applications long ago.	14	Very ready to work-worked throughout incarceration ▪ a lot of educational and vocational opportunities in prisons ▪ I had prepared and done a lot of work ▪ family support ▪ family kept me in touch with reality and what I would need ▪ I worked hard ▪ communication- the different aspects-not just talking but listening-also the ability to speak-to speak in front of others-to sit and share a story-to know my words have value ▪ I have a desire to remain teachable-every day is a learning experience-if you keep an open mind you can learn something from somebody-you can learn something if you stay openminded.	55

Barriers	Code count	Strengths	Code count
The barriers are real and very strong ▪ barriers cut me down many times ▪ very discouraging ▪ people coming back to prison who did not have a proper plan ▪ I probably felt a little overconfident ▪ did not realize how much conviction would impact ability to find work ▪ finding a house was even hard ▪ a lot of struggles ▪ surprised how a person with my skills and expertise has had to struggle to find work ▪ getting a chance is the toughest part ▪ had over a dozen interviews where I aced them and then rejected ▪ Ban the Box just delays the inevitable rejection ▪ I can't be a licensed counselor anymore ▪ I can't pull a top-secret clearance anymore ▪ Parole has impacted a lot of decisions ▪ I have to have computer monitoring even with labor jobs not allowed in people's homes ▪ the assumption that because I've been to prison I'm broken.	46	Already obtained degrees ▪ two masters degrees-one business-one counseling ▪ intelligence ▪ 4.0 GPA-getting accepted for academic reasons was easy ▪ served over 20 years in military leadership roles ▪ leadership abilities ▪ after six months got permission to use the internet ▪ self-confidence ▪ technology skills ▪ accounting skills ▪ conscientiousness ▪ I don't dabble at work-get things done ▪ I relate to people well ▪ I care about people ▪ business management skills ▪ strong personal vision and mission ▪ personal networking skills ▪ interviewing skills ▪ job search skills ▪ prison does not break everybody ▪ attention to detail ▪ perseverance ▪ I'm a person who keeps pushing and wanting to make things happen ▪ don't give up.	34
Not making enough money to be an independent responsible citizen ▪ getting paid based on mistakes not skillset ▪ people judge you based on criminal record ▪ they make you feel you should be grateful for what they'll give you ▪ I was scared to death nobody would hire me ▪ they're going to turn me down ▪ fed myself these messages that nobody would hire me ▪ had [only] a high school diploma ▪ this felony conviction looming over my head ▪ being another statistic for somebody else to look down on ▪ penal system doesn't care about your education or work ▪ they didn't offer anything ▪ nobody cared whether you had books ▪ I was ashamed ▪ how long and tough the road has been ▪ signed up to vote at 18 lost my right to vote all in the same year ▪ Haven't voted in 31 years.	40	Productive ▪ responsible ▪ God and village ▪ I provide a needed skillset ▪ persistence ▪ I have an impeccable resume ▪ I was relentless ▪ I refused to give up ▪ I fought to have my name and record cleared ▪ I interview well ▪ I would apply where my background would be a benefit ▪ I speak the language of recovery ▪ I'm always up for learning ▪ I enrolled in college ▪ I soaked information up like a sponge ▪ I have a lot to give ▪ I would do whatever I had to do to find a job ▪ I was reliable ▪ I was consistent ▪ I'm not satisfied with just doing my job ▪ I knew how to search the internet and attach a resume- always been tech savvy ▪ determined ▪ tenacity ▪ fortitude ▪ courage in spite of ▪ a job in alignment with what I'm doing ▪ I love my job.	53
When incarcerated burden is placed on family ▪ retirement payments to family got cut off ▪ case was so high profile ▪ people apprehensive about attaching name to mine ▪ not in good mental space ▪ prison was traumatizing ▪ emotional baggage ▪ shame ▪ embarrassment felt because of conviction ▪ prison upset my whole life trajectory ▪ vocational programs were total garbage ▪ didn't even have computers ▪ people with typed resume would at a disadvantage ▪ have to reveal conviction ▪ people have biases ▪ had job offers but had to reveal ▪ some organizations hire people with convictions but have a plateau.	22	Knew how to create a resume, network, job search ▪ had strong credentials ▪ technical education background ▪ felt good about my skills ▪ had a house and family ▪ had a full breadth of life before prison ▪ highly educated ▪ more advanced than others educationally ▪ always eager to learn ▪ love to go to school ▪ find value in my work ▪ excites me on the inside to be a servant leader ▪ facing hard challenges ▪ perseverance ▪ have to have tough skin ▪ not internalizing rejection ▪ keeping life organized ▪ continuing to hone skills ▪ persistence.	48

Note. Counts reflect multiple instances of codes repeated in the same case.

Theme 6: Purposeful Living

In the sixth theme, *purposeful living*, I categorized words and phrases that referred to efforts participants have made to live well, be virtuous, or seek personal satisfaction by helping others and making the world a better place. I coded 248 occurrences of expressions of thought and experiences related to living with purpose across the cases.

Mark described using his education and leadership experience while incarcerated to help facilitate a prison program that helped inmates develop personal vision and mission statements for their futures. Mark said,

> My vision and mission statement has to do with service and helping people find autonomy and find self-worth because nobody wants to be on welfare. Eventually, they're going to want to have something meaningful and sustainable, and autonomous. And so I help people do that, and it's very rewarding.

Daniel told me about his efforts to risk rejection and failure and get through the discomforts associated with social stigma to better his life. He said the personal satisfaction he gets from helping other people find meaning and purpose in their lives makes the adversity he encountered worth it. Daniel said, "Supporting my peers gives me personal value." Daniel added that it was crucial to build and maintain positive relationships with people inside and outside prison as his situation progressed. He said, "Just that awareness that there are good people in the world and connecting with them helps you survive."

Zora talked about what makes her life after the adverse events so meaningful.

> I have people now. I [know people] who invite me to things that happen in their lives. I've had the opportunity to enjoy participating in weddings, watching them get vehicles and cars, or their very first place [home] for the first time, or just go on vacation outside of this state for the very first time in their life. And so, all of that kind of excites me on the inside, to be able to feel like you are a servant leader if nothing else.

Elaine repeatedly described her belief that "giving back" or purposefully caring for others was a duty she had to fulfill because so many others cared for her in her time of need. Talking about her work, Elaine shared,

> To help somebody get placed in a facility means that somebody took the time and cared for them throughout that process. I don't care if it takes 12 hours or my entire shift to get someone placed. If I go home, knowing that person has a bed to lay in and some hot food and a warm shower and people that care about them, then I've done my job.

Juan explained that, with encouragement from his large and supportive family, even though he was in prison, he worked "to develop my purpose in who I am." Juan said he learned to appreciate changes as he matured from youth to middle age in prison. He said he chose to change for the better and succeed even if he never got out. Juan said, "Success, for me, was just knowing I'm doing something to give back. And, I worked hard at it." Juan explained that he not only performed his prison job duties and earned college degrees while incarcerated but, "I worked hard to develop programs within prison, to build relationships, to keep the peace and keep everybody inclusive, and to

break the cycle of violence and discrimination, and racism that exists behind the walls." He said he continued to live purposefully after his release by guiding others toward the discovery of their own meaningful work,

> I continued doing what I was doing [mentoring in prison] in reentry and in the workforce development organization to support my peers [after prison]. It brought me value, personal value, and confidence that I'm doing the right thing. I have my purpose. And it's appreciated by the people I want to help the most. Just to see them flourish -- they come in, and they're not sure of what direction they want to go. And we start to have a talk and start to identify what their passion is and what they want to do. And then to see them later, just being independent and having their new car, or their own place, or maybe a child and not worrying about having a child and now what am I going to do for income?

Tom told me he believed,

> Meaningful work is absolutely important for well-being. You need to like what you're doing to some degree 'cause if you don't, it becomes mundane. Work's got to serve a purpose, or you've got to get satisfaction out of doing it.

Using "The Tortoise and the Hare" Aesop's Fable, Tom related winning in life to finding a job and working hard to develop a meaningful legitimate career. Tom made a point of communicating his purpose for participating in my study as sending a message of hope,

> I'm doing this [study] because I want to give people hope that there's opportunity [for sustainable work] out here. I've met some people in there [prison], and all they've known is the street, and they're highly intelligent people. My purpose is

> to encourage people to be the Turtle instead of the Hare. [As the Turtle,] you don't have to stress that kind of life and loss, or the pain that goes with that lifestyle. I don't care if you ever had a job. Get out here. There's plenty of jobs. They [employers] want somebody just to show up and be there consistently, and they're willing to teach you.

Unusual Circumstances

The coronavirus pandemic prohibited using brick and mortar agency and community center bulletin boards for recruiting case participants, as I had initially planned. Employment agencies and community centers across the country were closed before I obtained Institutional Review Board approval. Consequently, I adjusted my plan to reflect the use of virtual recruiting in my approved research proposal. Instead of posting flyers at physical locations, I recruited volunteers using a flyer and information posted on multiple community reentry and workforce development Facebook pages. However, when weeks passed and only two volunteers had contacted me, I used snowballing sampling to recruit the rest of my study participants. I took advantage of one agency administrator's offer to contact people affiliated with the organization who might be interested, and this led to an unusual circumstance. Four of my six participants were employed by the same nonprofit organization. However, the organization has locations in 11 states. The case participants I recruited worked in different job duty positions and at different locations across the nation. Therefore, I used a maximum variation sampling strategy as planned. My virtual recruiting method provided six cases involving people

with diverse background experiences. My case participants served time in varying types of correctional facilities and obtained sustainable wage employment after release.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure my multiple case study's trustworthiness, I followed the rigorous design protocol and processes recommended by qualitative methodologists (Stake, 1995, Yin, 2018). In this section, I provide evidence of trustworthiness defined by the essentials: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Following a rigorous research design protocol helped me ensure the credibility of my research. I obtained Institutional Review Board approval to conduct my research. Using recorded semistructured telephone interviews, I gathered rich subjective data. I transcribed audio recordings to written documents and provided copies to each participant for member checking. Additionally, I provided copies of the audio recordings and written transcripts to my chairperson for review. Finally, I developed and followed a scrupulous coding process, grouped codes into categories, and linked participants' expressions of perceptions and experiences into overarching themes.

I also used data triangulation, as suggested by Fusch et al. (2018), to increase validity and bind other data sources with my small sample of six case interviews. I verified the information I gained through qualitative interviews with public records (See Table 5). Additionally, I used hand-written memos to support my interpretation of participants' non-verbal expressions of emotions such as fear or passion, and auditory cues such as intonation, deep exhaling, or silence (Stake, 1995). The repeated expression

of similar perceptions and the decreasing number of new ideas across the interviews as I completed them evidenced data saturation (Yin, 2018).

Transferability

The volunteers who participated in my study had shared the experience of finding sustainable wage employment after being incarcerated at different correctional facilities and locations across the country. I considered the participants to be experts on this subject matter. I planned to use the maximum variation heterogeneity sampling strategy (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995) and purposefully recruit participants who have had diverse experiences to share about finding sustainable wage employment after incarceration. I focused on heterogeneity sampling to increase the potential for identifying the uniqueness of personal experiences and the patterns and commonalities that occur amid the diversity (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). I succeeded in recruiting participants who had a variety of correctional, vocational, and employment experiences so that my study had the potential for transferability across the different county, state, and federal penal systems and in rural, suburban, and urban communities across the U.S. (Yin, 2018). I used detail-rich description (Yin, 2018) in reporting the diverse perceptions and lived experiences of my six participants. Additionally, my use of transparency and rigorous methodology throughout my research has maximized the potential for researchers in the future to replicate or extend my work (Yin, 2018).

Dependability

To increase my study's dependability, I collected detail-rich data from multiple sources, and I confirmed the accuracy of the subjective data I collected in qualitative

interviews. I compared the information I gathered in interviews with public records (Fusch et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). I explored public records on vocational program opportunities in specific correctional facilities and communities that my six participants mentioned were available during and after their incarcerations (See Table 5). Instead of reporting just the individual stories presented in each case, I synthesized data between the cases to understand better what may be happening across the United States [by drawing from the archival records as well as synthesis of case data] (Fusch et al., 2018).

Confirmability

Before beginning my research, I identified my values, assumptions, biases, and vulnerabilities that could influence my effectiveness as a researcher (Levitt et al., 2017). Because of my personal lived experiences and passion for working to make community reentry after incarceration achievable for more justice-involved people, I anticipated feelings of empathy and hope, for example, while collecting and analyzing data. I managed my biases and emotions to ensure reliable results by adhering to rigorous data collection, analysis, and reporting protocol and treating participants ethically (Levitt et al., 2017). I consciously put aside my preconceived ideas and personal beliefs through bracketing when interpreting data results (Levitt et al., 2017). I also documented my thoughts, emotions, and awareness of bias or assumptions in memos during data collection, analysis, and reporting using a reflexive process (Levitt et al., 2017; Yin, 2018).

I used the questions in my semistructured interview guide as checkpoints to guard against researcher bias and to allow the interviewees to tell their stories in their own

words (McGrath et al., 2018; Yin, 2018). Additionally, I used member checking to review my reflexivity as the researcher (McGrath et al., 2018). I sent each participant a digital copy of the written interview transcript and asked each to confirm the meaning I associated with the responses (McGrath et al., 2018).

Summary

In Chapter 4, I described my recruiting, data collection, and audio transcription procedures. I presented a case-by-case analysis of participants' perspectives and experiences, followed by a cross-case analysis and synthesis of the subjective data. I explained how I reduced hundreds of coded expressions of thought and experience to present my results, using six overarching themes. I explained how I incorporated data from public records of vocational service programs and memos I wrote during the data collection process to increase my study's trustworthiness. In Chapter 5, I present my interpretation of these results as findings. I organize my research findings by the themes that emerged in my analysis and compare them with the literature I reviewed in Chapter 2. Additionally, I present my thoughts about how future research may extend my work to help identify the processes and vocational services people use to obtain sustainable wage employment after incarceration.

Chapter 5: Interpretation of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to describe and compare the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens to gain knowledge about how, if at all, they used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. As stated, existing research illuminates the importance of institutional and community program services for helping formerly incarcerated citizens find sustainable wage work (Duwe, 2018; NELP, 2016). However, in reviewing research literature, I found a gap in knowledge about the processes used by formerly incarcerated citizens to obtain sustainable wage employment and the availability of vocational services during and after prison (Ives, 2016; Richmond, 2014; Weisburd et al., 2017).

In this chapter, I review and discuss my research findings and their alignment with my theoretical framework and existing research. I highlight how my study results illuminate specific vocational programming aspects that could be cultivated during and after prison to improve employment outcomes for people returning to society. I conclude this chapter and my study with suggestions for further research.

Interpretation of Findings

For my study, I sought to answer one research question:

RQ: How, if at all, do formerly incarcerated citizens use vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment?

I anticipated diversity among the answers to this open-ended question. As I predicted, my research question invited responses that enveloped the unique circumstances, choices,

and processes used by case participants in obtaining employment. However, I found conclusive similarities among the six cases.

From each of my cases, I learned that my research question had two distinct answers: (a) how people used in-custody vocational programs if they had any, and (b) how they used community services after release. I found that case participants had various in-custody vocational service opportunities from “there was nothing in there” to “total garbage” to “I completed three associate’s degrees in prison.” Case participants who had opportunities said they used vocational programs during prison, “if even just to do time,” as an individual I gave the pseudonym Daniel, reported. However, all six described in-custody services as inefficient and not easily accessible for most incarcerated people. I found that all six cases supported adding or updating vocational services during incarceration to improve employment outcomes after release. I also found all six participants discovered it was essential to find and utilize vocational services after prison to obtain sustainable wage employment.

My participants all reported that if vocational services existed in their prisons, they lacked program fidelity. Participants told me vocational programs were often of low quality, outdated, or completely lacking. This finding confirmed existing research (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017; Young, 2014), as discussed in Chapter 2. Specifically, my findings indicated that higher quantity and quality of vocational programs, more than just GED programs, basic computer, or trade-skill programs, are essential for overcoming social stigma and employment barriers.

My findings are consistent with the results of Couloute (2018), Duwe and Clark (2017), NELP (2016), Ring and Gill (2017), and Tolbert and Hudson (2015).

Despite lacking quality of services, all participants told me that taking advantage of opportunities to participate in any kind of prison programs, like substance abuse counseling or resume writing, even if they were outdated, helped them, somehow, after release. The consensus among my case participants was that vocational services in prison were not enough assistance for overcoming the barriers to sustainable wage employment in society after release. All the case participants said that after release, they had to seek and accept help from others, such as their families, community agencies, clergy, and felon-friendly employers to achieve autonomy and well-being. Additionally, all participants in my study revealed that to overcome the barriers to employment after incarceration, they had to:

- redeem themselves—work to recover physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually to achieve well-being;
- become humble—admit their imperfections, limitations, and wrongdoings as human beings and accept help from others;
- be grateful—appreciate second chances, a changed perspective on life, and focus on all the good people and things that happen, instead of the bad;
- make something good from the adverse experiences—deliberately improve themselves and allow the adversity to enrich their lives;
- persevere—work hard to overcome barriers, keep trying after rejection, persist with determination to succeed; and

- live with purpose—be virtuous, do meaningful work, help others, and make the world a better place.

In this section, I discuss how my results align with my theoretical framework and the literature I reviewed in Chapter 2. I interpret how my six emergent themes expand on the more commonly considered focus of strengths-based counseling theories. I then organize my interpretation of findings according to the six overarching themes that emerged through data analysis and synthesis: redemption, humility, gratitude, making something good from the adverse experience, perseverance, and purposeful living.

I used participants' spoken words to support my interpretations of their unique perspectives and experiences. Participants' verbal responses to interview questions convey their emotions, assumptions, and thoughts as they told me about navigating the complex social process of obtaining sustainable wage employment after prison. I also used direct quotations from interviews to empower research participants with voices that may contribute to social change. I, the researcher, selected the fictitious names used in reporting my findings.

Theoretical Framework

The themes that emerged from my study align with Rogers (1946, 1951, 1961), who posited that people use their strengths to overcome adversity in seeking self-actualization. Furthermore, these themes confirm Holland's (1959) theory that people choose career paths based on a fit between their strengths, values, and work. Holland added that these paths might have to change with life circumstances. Each individual drew upon personal strengths to overcome employment barriers when reentering the

workforce after incarceration. However, the themes that emerged in my study point to self-identified virtuous qualities or positive attitudes that I interpreted may be as important for obtaining work after prison as skills or experience. In essence, my study's findings revealed that individuals seek sustainable employment as a step to well-being. They change career paths when necessary to succeed. They ask for help and are grateful for it. They do not give up, even if discouraged or scared. They seek not only to improve their circumstances, but they deliberately strive to make the world better.

In three of my study's six cases, participants found they had to learn to apply the education and workforce skills they had developed before incarceration differently in a new career after release (Holland, 1959; Rogers, 1946). To do so, the three participants used the six themes as strengths. The other three participants were incarcerated before developing careers or setting vocational goals in any particular employment field. In those three cases, I found that individuals first developed these theme-related qualities as strengths that helped them envision their career paths (Holland, 1959).

Aligning with Rogers (1946) and Holland (1959) throughout their interviews, all six of my case participants described feeling stronger as they recaptured a feeling of value or worth as citizens after incarceration, Theme 1, "on a journey to redemption," as the participant I named Zora put it. All six noted that becoming humble, Theme 2, through sharing their vulnerabilities and challenging experience with others, gave them strength (Rogers, 1946, 1951). They learned to swallow their pride, to stop blaming others for their problems, and to accept guidance or ask for help.

Precisely because of their justice involvement and incarceration, all six participants told me that they became grateful, Theme 3, for having advantages or blessings that other people did not have. They learned to identify their advantages as strengths, confirming Gottfredson et al. (1974), Holland (1959), and Nauta (2010). All six case participants also described how they made something useful from their negative life experience, Theme 4, and became more vital for having endured conviction and incarceration (Rogers, 1946; Holland, 1959). They used their tragic experiences to become cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually stronger. By doing so, they could focus their lives on helping others and making the world better (Rogers, 1946; Holland, 1959).

My study participants gave examples of learning that they had to work with diligence to achieve their goals in a highly competitive workforce, aligning with strengths-based theory. The six participants found that perseverance, Theme 5, or not giving up was essential for obtaining sustainable wage employment after incarceration. They all noted that, because of a felony conviction record, finding work after prison was just plain hard to do, and there was no quick, easy way to achieve well-being.

Finally, as theorized by Holland (1959) and Rogers (1946), all six cases described how developing a positive purpose, Theme 6, and setting achievable goals gave them the strength to overcome employment barriers. They all discovered that helping other people helped them come to terms with the past, find meaning in their daily living, and redeem themselves through their work. Based on this theoretical framework, I interpreted that in some cases, in-custody and transitional programs to help people strengthen their self-

worth, humility, gratitude, positivity, determination to succeed, and identify a purpose in their lives could be valuable for citizens reentering the workforce after incarceration.

Redemption

In Chapter 2, I discussed research on stigma as negative social attitudes that discredit people based on undesirable attributes (Goffman, 1963; Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018). I noted that stigma often results in the discriminatory or adverse treatment of groups of people (Goffman, 1963; Rade et al., 2018). My results extended the findings of researchers who reported that social stigma often negatively impacts formerly incarcerated citizens' abilities to obtain work or achieve well-being (Jones Young & Powell, 2015; Rade et al., 2018). My research also confirms the Rade et al. (2018) findings that people stigmatized by a criminal record may be discriminated against in society based on past behaviors for many years after completing legal requirements.

As noted in Chapter 2, researchers have shown that the general public often considers formerly incarcerated people pathologically or morally flawed from conviction throughout their lives (Antoine-Morse, 2019; Ellis, 2020). Ellis (2020) confirmed that social narratives stigmatize the justice-involved population long after they have fulfilled sentencing for punishment. Redemption in my study involved striving for self-actualization through deliberate efforts to overcome social stigma and shame for having committed crimes.

I noted that existing research shows that employment is essential for most people as a source of income and for life satisfaction (Schwartz, 2015). In my study, I found that satisfaction with their achievement of autonomy and well-being through work was

fundamental for achieving redemption in each of my cases. All six of my participants reported feeling satisfied with themselves because they assisted, helped, or mentored others in their daily work.

In my literature review, I also showed a common argument among researchers; that obtaining employment with high enough income to meet financial obligations is one of the most challenging tasks formerly incarcerated citizens face when reentering communities from prison (Barnes-Proby et al., 2014; Fredericksen & Omli, 2016; Western et al., 2015; Young, 2014). In my study, I found this to be true. One of the requirements for participation in my research was that individuals had obtained work that each defined as sustainable wage employment. In my interview icebreaker, I asked participants to explain the concept of *sustainable wage employment* to understand individuals' perceptions of the meaning of that term. All six of my participants stated that their jobs paid enough to satisfy more than their survival needs.

Extant research also shows that acquiring a job that pays sustainable wages to cover the cost of living and debts may influence people's prosocial lifestyle choices and abilities to desist from crime (Harding et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2017; Western et al., 2015). All six participants described sustainable wages as income that supported autonomy and well-being. All six gave examples of sustainable wages as enough income to pay for housing and utilities, a car and gas, food and necessities, and healthcare. Once they began to achieve independence and self-worth through sustainable wage employment, all six expressed sentiments that I interpreted within the redemption theme.

My study results provide evidence of six people's deliberate drive to rebuild self-worth, live with purpose, forgive themselves, and prove to society that they are valuable, productive citizens, as Antoine-Morse (2019) also found. For my multiple case study participants, I found that the physical, mental, financial, social, and spiritual aspects of achieving well-being after conviction were closely related to obtaining sustainable wage employment. All six people described examples of how whole-person recovery from the crime-conviction-incarceration experience depended upon finding work that:

- was meaningful and provided a sense of purpose,
- allowed them to demonstrate their value in society, and
- paid enough for them to be independent and feel satisfied.

All six participants indicated that it was through becoming self-sufficient and productive that they forgave themselves for past mistakes. They conveyed that, through their work, they could prove to the world that they were valuable people worthy of a second chance (Antoine-Morse, 2019; Ellis, 2020). My participants provided examples of how they worked to improve themselves and forgive themselves, even if society did not. They reported that, following their felony convictions, it was essential to pay the support they received forward, to redeem themselves in society's eyes. In my study, I found that obtaining meaningful, sustainable wage employment after criminal conviction and incarceration can be crucial in a person's efforts to feel redeemed.

As stated, for my research study, redemption referred to whole-person recovery from the crime-conviction-incarceration experience that was typically a process of regaining autonomy and well-being. Striving for redemption appeared to be an

underlying force in my participants' efforts to obtain purposeful work that could lead them to independence and well-being.

Humility

According to Nielsen and Marrone (2018), humility is a personal quality involving self-regulation that guards against excessive pride or self-aggrandizement. Humble people realize something more significant than self exists (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). And, humble people commonly acknowledge their weaknesses with their strengths, collaborate well, and appreciate others' help without experiencing a significant threat to one's ego (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). I found that my study participants exemplified humility as a beneficial quality when seeking employment after incarceration. They talked about keeping their egos in check by following frustrating parole restrictions and asking for and accepting help. They talked about how they grew to accept the social stigma, external control of their lives, and negative collateral consequences that made obtaining work exceptionally challenging. My study participants demonstrated how becoming humble can increase people's abilities to work with and help others.

Weidman et al. (2018) found consensus across research on humility that the sentiment is usually socially desirable and psychologically beneficial. However, when elicited by setbacks in life, low self-esteem, or associated with shame, humility can be self-demeaning (Weidman et al., 2018). My research results suggest that participants identified with humility as beneficial for career success, even if prompted by setbacks in life or embarrassment from social stigma. From spoken words and nuances in tone, I

interpreted that my study participants considered the demeaning conviction and incarceration experience forced them to become humble. In my study, the data shows that each participant came to understand humility as a beneficial trait. Reportedly, this allowed them to connect more genuinely with others, aligning with Weidman et al. (2018). They began to like the people they were becoming, more than the people they had been, through accepting their humanness.

Participants also expressed humility when I asked about whether they made plans for employment while still in prison. Confirming reports by the Charles Colson Task Force (2016), Duwe and Clark (2017), and Ring and Gill (2017), I found that participants discovered making employment plans before prison release was futile due to lacking in-custody services and external control of their choices. My participants' experiences were also consistent with the NELP (2016) findings and Samele et al. (2018), who noted that transitional employment services and community partnerships enable people to develop resilience, self-worth, and well-being.

My interpretations are also consistent with findings reported by Couloute (2018) and Rade et al. (2018). I found that my participants felt education and experience would help them find work after prison but were humbled to learn that, once employers ran a background check, it was difficult to get a chance to show their knowledge and aptitudes. Four of my six participants had college degrees when reentering society from prison, yet still identified employment barriers.

Additionally, participants who had achieved successful careers before prison were humbled to learn that they no longer had a competitive edge in the workforce, even if

they held graduate degrees and credentials. This finding aligns with Couloute (2018), Delaney et al. (2016), and Rade et al. (2018), who concluded that there are increasing demands for higher credentialing and skill level in the workforce challenging job seekers returning to society from prison. All six case participants reported that their pathways to sustainable wage employment diverged from the ideas or plans they had because of their felony convictions, parole requirements, or lack of qualification for the work they wanted to do. All said they had to humble themselves and accept help from others.

I found that my study participants agreed it was essential to learn to talk about their humanness, past mistakes, and the lessons they learned through their conviction experiences with potential employers. My study participants told me they became more competitive employment seekers by openly discussing their past wrongdoings and weaknesses while focusing on their strengths.

Gratitude

In their seminal work, Emmons and McCullough (2003) defined gratitude using two components: 1) affirming good things that happen and 2) recognizing an external source was responsible for the good that resulted. I found all six of my participants described this two-part understanding of gratitude as a sentiment. Often, the codes I clustered in the gratitude theme during analysis overlapped codes in the humility theme because of that second component.

My findings confirm existing research on the value of family and social support for citizens returning to communities from prison (Novo-Corti & Barreiro-Gen, 2015; Rade et al., 2018), as discussed in Chapter 2. I interpreted that my study participants

genuinely appreciated the help and support others gave them because they may not have succeeded without it. Also, I interpreted that my study participants believed they had an indebtedness to their families and society for their support. To pay back the support they received, they prioritized helping others in their daily living.

My findings also confirm research supporting improving the quantity and quality of vocational services during and after incarceration. In my literature review, I reported that Davis et al. (2014), Duwe and Clark (2014), Ring and Gill (2017), and Tolbert and Hudson (2015) identified lacking education and workforce skill training and not keeping current with advances in technology as critical reasons people struggle to find work after incarceration. In one case, after long-term confinement, a participant stated that there had been no opportunity to learn about email or the internet, and online job application requirements were "overwhelming." I found all six study participants found in-custody services lacking. However, they were grateful for already having technical skills or opportunities to learn them in their communities after incarceration.

I also found that, when seeking employment, the participants in my study indicated they were thankful for "good fortune," "luck," "blessings," and "being in the right place at the right time." This finding aligns with Allen's (2018) conclusion that people often feel gratitude for events that they attribute to divine intervention, nature, or fate.

As stated, I interpreted participants' expressions of gratitude for help and support were linked to their feeling indebted to family and society. I found participants'

expressions of gratitude for people and events in their lives corresponded with their efforts to make something good from their adverse experiences.

Making Something Good from Adverse Experiences

Exploring the differences between the way people think about adversity, Ford et al. (2018) studied people's abilities to recall positive and negative details when experiencing adverse events. My findings confirm that participants learned from their experiences and become stronger workforce candidates because of them. When participants mentioned problems finding employment during our interviews, they told me how they worked to resolve them. When they noted negativity about the lack of outdated, low-quality vocational services, they told me about their actions to make situations better.

I interpreted that my findings extend the existing research on vocational services' effectiveness in U.S. correctional facilities. In my literature review, I discussed research that supports my participants' reports that prison vocational programs had lengthy waitlists, were too short-term, were outdated, and were often instructed by peer inmates (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Ring & Gill, 2017; Smith, 2016). Still, my study participants made the best of their situations and took advantage of any services offered.

My findings also confirm research that reported in-custody vocational services often do not provide the same level of training, education, or career development valued in society (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017).

Perseverance

My findings confirm the existing research on perseverance (Datu et al., 2018; Lechner et al., 2019; McDermott et al., 2019). The six participants in my study had career

paths altered by felony convictions, incarceration, and post-release social stigma. They each expressed evidence of perseverance as a strength used to overcome barriers to employment, as discussed by Butts and Schiraldi (2018) and Harding et al. (2018) in chapter 2.

Lechner et al. (2019) used the term grit to refer to this personality trait. These researchers found that grit (perseverance in my study) is relevant for achieving success in our ever-changing society (Lechner et al., 2019). Lechner et al. also found that grit is incrementally associated with career success even more than cognitive ability. I found that all six of my cases believed their perseverance was more indispensable than their intelligence or credentials when seeking employment after incarceration.

McDermott et al. (2019) studied the relationship between perseverance and employment. The researchers found that the ability to endure hardships and continue to strive for goals is more critical for successful employment outcomes than a person's social class, intelligence, or gender. Datu et al. (2018) found three themes embedded in the concept of perseverance in their research study: perseverance of effort, consistency of interests, and adaptability to change. In this section, I interpreted how my study results confirm the Datu et al. research findings and align with research discussed in Chapter 2 (Butts & Schiraldi, 2018; Hall et al., 2016; Harding et al., 2018; Rogers, 1946).

As explained by Datu et al. (2018), perseverance of effort is an individual's inclination to exert constant action even when faced with obstacles and difficulties. In my study, participants revealed prominent markers related to perseverance of effort, including references to persistence, hard work, determination, and readiness to try again

after failure. My findings align with Roger's (1946) strengths-based theory about people's drive to seek self-actualization.

According to Datu et al. (2018), consistency of interests refers to the people's capacity to sustain focus and passion towards long-term ambitions. In my study, the indicators of consistency of interest involved focus, passion for a type of work, and setting priorities.

In the Datu et al. (2018) study, adaptability to situations was an embedded element of perseverance. Despite hardships, success depended on people's ability to adapt effectively to the ever-changing circumstances in life (Datu et al., 2018). In my study, evidence of adaptability to situations encompassed appreciating changes, desire for improvement, planning in flexibility, and maintaining harmonious relationships over time. These findings align with Holland (1959), who theorized that people adapt to social changes, so their values fit with their work environment.

Purposeful Living

Apel and Horney (2017) and Cantora (2015) provided evidence that people choose meaningful work to substantiate that their lives have value because of what they do. My findings extend this research evidence. In my study, I found that people believed they had triumphed over difficult circumstances and attained well-being, not just by achieving short-term goals. My participants all stated that having a personal mission or life purpose was essential for success. Participants' believed they achieved well-being after prison by identifying an individual purpose and deliberately choosing to prioritize their daily activities accordingly.

My findings also confirm the Clifton et al. (2020) results, showing how people used adverse circumstances to reconstruct their identities and add meaning to their lives. My participants made deliberate choices to help or mentor others while incarcerated to make the time they spent behind bars meaningful. They talked about how helping others inside prison influenced their career success after they were released.

Clauss-Ehlers and Parham (2017) and Hulshof et al. (2020) discussed purposeful living as effortfully pushing oneself beyond conveniences and comfort zones to get the most out of life. These researchers identified a correlation between having an identified life purpose, positive risk-taking to enrich life, and satisfaction with life (Clauss-Ehlers & Parham, 2017; Hulshof et al., 2020). My findings extend this research evidence. In my research, participants discussed seemingly insurmountable social stigma and collateral consequences related to felony criminal records. They talked about risking their vulnerabilities to shame and rejection in striving to live with purpose.

Clauss-Ehlers and Parham (2017) also found that people who identify purpose in life tend to incorporate *hope,* or an ability to envision a better future, through meaningful work engagement. The participants in my study expressed that "success" was related to finding a job and working hard to develop a meaningful legitimate career. I interpreted that all six participants desired to share a message of hope for other justice-involved people.

Limitations

In Chapter 1, I noted concerns about this study's limitations, specifically trustworthiness, generalizability, and bias that are typical weaknesses of qualitative case

study research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The gathering and analysis of a considerable amount of data from in-depth interviews were time-consuming and prevented conducting a large-scale study (Stake 1995; Yin, 2018). As a single researcher using only six cases, I noted trustworthiness could be a concern (Stake 1995; Yin, 2018). However, I selected the small sample and specific context purposefully for their potential to provide useful information for formerly incarcerated citizens, vocational services program administrators, and future research (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). I used a purposeful, maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling strategy (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995) to manage possible sampling bias. I successfully recruited participants of both genders, varying adult ages, races, ethnicities, and from diverse geographical and economic regions of the United States (Yin, 2018). I noted clear evidence of data saturation after completing the analysis of five of my six cases.

Trustworthiness and generalizability (Yin, 2018) may be limited by my researcher-interpreted, in-depth description of subjective human truths. Specifically, each case was unique in defining what constitutes sustainable wage employment, the diverse experiences people had in prison and during the process of obtaining employment, and individual perceptions of vocational services opportunities (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). It was not my intention that the same data could be replicated or repeated in any future study (Yin, 2018). Neither were the results of this multiple case study intended to represent the processes used by all formerly incarcerated citizens to obtain employment.

Additionally, I could have misinterpreted or misrepresented the subjective data I gathered due to bias, emotions, or participant reporting errors (Korstjens & Moser,

2018b; Yin, 2018). To reduce the effects of researcher bias and the distortion of data, I worked with integrity and transparency throughout my data collection, analysis, and reporting phases (Korstjens & Moser, 2018b; Yin, 2018). I used memos and bracketing to keep bias in check (Levitt et al., 2017). I also used probing questions during interviews to clarify information, asked participants to review my data by member-checking, and compared data collected in my interviews with other sources (Korstjens & Moser, 2018a). Additionally, I provided a copy of my audio recordings and written transcripts of data to my committee chairperson for review.

One particular limitation I did not predict in Chapter 1 was that, due to the coronavirus pandemic, I could not post my recruitment flyers at brick and mortar community centers and instead posted information only on reentry organizations' Facebook pages. Because of this limitation, four of my six participants had found sustainable wage employment after their incarceration with the same national non-profit organization, although in different job roles and regions of the United States.

Implications for Social Change

My qualitative multiple case study extended a research base that lacked knowledge about how, if at all, formerly incarcerated citizens have used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment. In Chapter 1, I identified a social problem: While there are vocational service programs provided for some people during and after incarceration, many citizens returning to communities cannot obtain sustainable wage employment (Looney & Turner, 2018; Ring & Gill, 2017). The inability to obtain sustainable wage employment may jeopardize the achievement of well-being for this

population and contribute to hardships for their families and communities (Davis et al., 2013; Duwe, 2017).

My study may inspire the improvement of vocational services for people in correctional facilities and in communities after their release. From my limited sample of six formerly incarcerated citizens, I learned that, although reentry workforce programs are available in many U.S. communities, the availability and quality of in-prison and transitional programs are commonly lacking. My findings revealed that matching the quality and availability of programs in prisons to those existing in communities could increase individuals' potential for obtaining sustainable wage employment after incarceration. Specifically, my findings revealed the importance of helping people develop soft skills in addition to education and technical abilities to increase their employability. Additionally, my results indicate that encouraging virtuous character and soft skills may be an essential component of effective vocational counseling. One critical skill noted by all participants was learning how to discuss their convictions and rehabilitation with employers while focusing on their strengths and value as employees.

For individuals, my research reveals how people can develop positive attitudes to supplement education, training, and experience when competing for employment. My findings offer insight into how people have used these six virtuous qualities as strengths to overcome well-known obstacles, obtain sustainable wage employment, and achieve autonomy and well-being after years of incarceration. Additionally, my findings show that, with individual effort, these positive attitudes can be developed as strengths without planned vocational programs.

My research may be useful for professionals in fields related to correctional programming, including criminal justice, workforce and career development, human and social services, community partnerships, and social policy who guide individuals toward well-being. It may inspire new and advanced research related to supporting formerly incarcerated citizens in their quests to obtain sustainable wage employment in their communities. Additionally, the knowledge gained in my study may help improve reentry outcomes for people returning to communities from incarceration in the future and may ultimately contribute to American communities' wellness.

Recommendations

My research findings suggest a need to develop vocational program strategies that provide more services and better quality opportunities for incarcerated people. My results confirm and extend the existing research. Researchers have suggested that formerly incarcerated citizens are at a disadvantage when competing for jobs in their communities because programs in correctional facilities are inefficient or lacking (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017). Specifically, to effectively help people compete for sustainable wage jobs after incarceration, prison programming must be long-term, in-depth, and provide higher education and technology competence (Charles Colson Task Force, 2016; Duwe & Clark, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017).

Importantly, as my findings support, programs must also focus on *employability* or personal qualities and skills that make individuals sought after by employers (Cerda et al., 2015; De Battisti et al., 2016). Additionally, my findings support programs with a planned continuum of services to help people transition from incarceration to society

(American Psychological Association, 2017). Yet, researchers identify few prison to community programs that provide transitional jobs for people after release (Barnes-Proby et al., 2014; Smith, 2016).

I framed my case study using strengths-based theories. Research shows that programs that target people's strengths and nurture individual assets may be vital to overcoming employment barriers after prison (Barnao, Ward, & Robertson, 2016; Shefer et al., 2018). My study participants extended this knowledge. They confirmed that focusing on workers' strengths and potential can encourage positive attitudes, purposeful living, and increase worker motivation, job performance, productive citizenry.

Therefore, based on the existing research and my research results, I suggest that five specific improvements are necessary for increasing sustainable wage employment outcomes for people leaving incarceration:

1. I recommend that correctional administrators evaluate vocational services to increase fidelity to match workforce services in society.
2. I recommend that correctional administrators add quality opportunities for higher education and technical skills training in prison facilities.
3. I recommend prison systems allow incarcerated people to access the internet in supervised programs, to search and apply for jobs before release from incarceration.
4. I recommend vocational rehabilitation counseling for incarcerated people directed explicitly at helping them develop virtuous qualities and soft skills to improve their employability.

5. I recommend incorporating transitional vocational programming for all people leaving prison that includes the establishment of employment-focused family and social support.

In my literature review, I noted that researchers had paid little attention to the views of people who are or were incarcerated regarding the availability and quality of correctional programming (Haas & Spence, 2017; Ring & Gill, 2017). My formerly incarcerated study participants confirmed these researchers' perspectives. They were grateful for the opportunity to share their first-hand experiences, voice their opinions, and inspire social change. I encourage future researchers to extend my research by comparing community vocational services' quality, accessibility, and outcomes with existing programs in correctional facilities using program users' perspectives. I also encourage future large-scale quantitative surveys and mixed-methods studies on this topic, targeting user perspectives. I suggest that more studies are needed to portray the existing inefficiencies and inconsistencies between services that are, or are not, available in different private, federal, and state prison systems.

Researcher Reflections

I applaud the participants in my study for their remarkable courage and willingness to show others how they overcame hardships to live well. I am honored to have been trusted with their deeply personal stories. Their stories have inspired me to continue researching this topic. I encourage more citizens with lived experience to voice their needs and offer their suggestions for social improvement as the experts in this field of study. I consider my research participants extraordinarily valuable people in our

society who have persevered in light of powerful stigma. I admire them, and I cheer for all of them on their journeys to career success and well-being.

Conclusion

The people I interviewed had, in the past, committed felony-level crimes and served their punishment for such. They lost their freedom and lived away from society, in prisons, for years of their lives. In some cases, individuals remained under parole supervision for additional years after prison release. Other researchers had identified the obstacles this population commonly faces when returning to society and searching for work. My study filled a gap in knowledge by identifying the strengths people have used to overcome the known barriers to employment and achieve well-being. My findings also extended the research by adding consumer perspectives showing inefficiency in vocational programming that helps people find sustainable employment after prison.

I developed my multiple case study to describe and compare the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens who obtained sustainable wage employment after release from prison. My findings highlight the extraordinary strength and courage of six individuals. My research confirms there is no better way to find solutions to social problems than to allow the people most affected by them to put their heads together. By putting stereotypes aside, listening to people's perspectives, and using the valuable information they provide, problems can be reduced or eliminated.

An important aspect of my findings is the importance of using the valuable information consumers can provide to solve problems and improve society. I predict that social issues will persist if biases against people are allowed to reduce the worth or

priority of knowledge only those who have lived experience can provide. I believe it can be difficult for citizens who have not lived the experience of felony conviction and years of incarceration to fully comprehend the physical, mental, and spiritual strength it took for my participants to compete and win in a workforce that discriminates punitively against them.

Conducting my study, I learned that for people reentering communities from prison, the known barriers to employment do, indeed, make developing a career more difficult. However, some who succeed, despite the forces against them, believe that their work is more satisfying because they had to fight for it. I found that people returning to society after years in prison do not only use knowledge, abilities, credentials, or prior work experience when seeking employment. They supplement their aptitudes by calling on a repertoire of virtuous qualities that make them even more beneficial to employers than they would be without having experienced adversity. They have developed qualities like taking on tough challenges and not giving up, asking for help to get things done, showing appreciation that encourages teamwork, focusing on solutions in complex situations, living with purpose, and continually striving to prove their worth instead of just doing a job. They perceive employment as an essential element for redeeming themselves or forgiving themselves, developing self-worth, and proving to society that they are valuable human beings. They prioritize their jobs and show commitment and work ethic. They just need to be given a chance.

I propose that providing programs for all justice-involved people to incorporate the how-to lessons of people who have developed meaningful, sustainable careers after prison could give more people that chance.

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Appendix A: Screening Questionnaire

Screening Questionnaire

Name: _____ Date: _____
Note: This form has been created for use by telephone or by email (with minor adjustments, such as removing this note), according to inquirers' preferences.

[Ice breaker] Hello (name)! Thank you for inquiring about my research study!

- Can you tell me what makes you interested in participating?

(I will continue, briefly, to converse by phone or email message and to answer the inquirer's initial questions about the study)

[Screening Questions] Do you mind if I ask five questions to make sure you are eligible to participate?

1) Have you tried to find, or are you employed in Texas after prison?

2) At some time before you found your job, were you in a state prison in Texas for at least one year?

3) Can you read the information about my study you have seen so far (e.g., flyer or information on a website)?

4) Will you be able to understand and converse with me in English if I interview you in by telephone?

Note: The inquirer must answer "yes" to all numbered questions to meet the eligibility requirements. If any answers are "no," I will explain why I am looking for participants who meet the criteria, I will thank the individual for his or her time, and I will ask if the person knows other people who may qualify for my study.

- If the inquirer meets the eligibility requirements, I will proceed to the Demographic Questionnaire Appendix B.

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

- Gender identity:
- 18 years of age or older (yes or no):
- Race/ethnicity:
- Level of education:
- State of residence:
- Rural, suburban, or urban community:
- Correctional facility or facilities where incarcerated:
- Years incarcerated:

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

❖ Indicates questions I will ask all participants to prepare for interview questions.

Q - Indicates a structured, milestone question I will ask in all interviews.

▪ Indicates planned probe for more detail if needed.

Opening
Thank you for agreeing to participate in my case study research. The purpose of this study is to describe and compare the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated citizens to gain knowledge about how, if at all, they used vocational services to obtain sustainable wage employment.

With this research, I hope to collect information that may ultimately be used to help people who are incarcerated prepare and find employment that supports well-being when it is time to reenter the workforce.

I would like your permission to record this interview, so I can listen carefully to what you are saying without having to write it all down. Your name and identifying information will not be recorded, used in conversation, or published, anywhere.

I would like to emphasize that you and the other participants will not just become research statistics. I would like to portray you as real people with real-life experiences. So, I would also like your permission to use an alias instead of your real name. Using a nickname will make it possible to protect your identity while preserving your humanness when we are conversing, and in my written report.

❖ Is there an alias you would like me to use that will not give away your identity in my report (or would you like to help me to think of one we could use?)

Thank you. I will call you ____ (alias) throughout this study when we are talking. You will also be named _____ (alias) in anything I record or report in writing.

❖ From the initial survey you filled out, I have the following information ____
(Here I will read demographic information collected before the interview on *Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire*, to check for accuracy).

❖ Is there anything you would like to change?

❖ Do you have any questions before we begin recording?

(Recording starts here.)

Interview Questions
Icebreaker 1 – In your own words, please tell me about the work you do.

Icebreaker 2 – Please explain your ideas about the concept of "sustainable wage employment."

Now let's start talking about how you found your job.

Q1- At the time you were released from incarceration, please describe any plan you had for finding employment.

- Please explain whether your plan led to obtaining the kind of work you wanted.

- If you did not have a plan, what were the steps you took that led you to your job?

Q2 - At the time you were released from incarceration, will you describe how you felt about your readiness and abilities to find a job when you were released? (For example, were you confident, scared, or hopeful?)

- What were your thoughts about whether you needed more education or training for a job you wanted?
- How, if at all, did laws, parole, or halfway house requirements affect your decisions to apply for or accept specific jobs?

Q3 - At the time you were released from incarceration, how would you describe your abilities to search and apply for jobs using online procedures and to communicate with prospective employers by email?

- Did you search and apply for jobs online after release? If so, how comfortable did the process make you feel?

- If you did not use an online process to obtain work, how do you feel about your abilities using technology in daily activities?

Q4 - Thinking about obtaining work after release, how would you describe the education, skill training, and work opportunities you had while incarcerated, if you had any?

- If you had opportunities, do you feel they helped you find employment that pays sustainable wages?

Q5 - Besides programming offered during incarceration, please describe any actions you took on your own to help improve your readiness for employment or better your qualifications? (Distance learning courses, reading, networking with family and friends).

Q6 - Describe after-release education or employment services you had an opportunity to utilize in your community (mandated or not mandated), if any.

- Did you seek help from any community agencies for searching for work or getting up to speed with computerized applications? If so, what agencies or programs?
- If you used community programs, how do you think they helped you find employment?

Q7 - You told me that you feel the wages you earn help sustain your autonomy and well-being. Will you please explain why you think this is true?

- Do you see yourself continuing to develop your career with more education or training? If so, how?

Q8 - Tell me about what makes your work meaningful for you, if you feel it is.

- Do you believe having meaningful work is important for your well-being?

Q9 - Please describe two personal strengths you possess and how you have used them to obtain or maintain employment.

Q10 - In your own words, please tell me the process you used to obtain your job.

- Did you search and apply online? Interview in person? How long did you have to wait to learn you had the job?

Closing

Thank you very much, ___ (pseudonym), for sharing your personal experiences. I want to restate that all you have shared with me will remain confidential.

- ❖ Can you think of anything else you would like to share before we finish this interview?

I will be in touch by email or phone, as we have agreed, if there is anything I need to clarify, and I would like you to feel free to contact me if you have any questions. I will email (or send) you a copy of the transcripts from this interview and ask if you would check the work over for accuracy.

I will share a report that describes some of the similarities and differences in people's experiences finding employment and individual perceptions about the helpfulness of vocational programs in which people participated when I have completed my study.

I will ask you to look over my report for accuracy too, and to contact me if there is anything you would like me to correct or clarify.

When my completed research report is published, I will provide you with a copy of that article. If I choose to write a book or publish articles in the future using the information you have so graciously provided, I will contact you for your permission.

Thank you again, sincerely, for devoting your time and for sharing your story with me.

Appendix D: Table of Supporting Public Records

	Vocational services opportunities identified by participant		Vocational services opportunities verified	
Time Served	Opportunities at correctional facilities	Opportunities in community	Opportunities at correctional facilities	Opportunities in community
4.5 years private state prison	None. "There weren't any [vocational program opportunities] in there."	Halfway house was affiliated with temporary job placement service.	Verified using the private prison agency website - no vocational services.	Verified halfway house and temporary service using internet websites.
4 years federal prison	Negative perception. Some training available but programs lacked fidelity. Pilot program for college courses.	Community workforce development program.	Verified using state's Department of Corrections website.	Verified using regional workforce websites.
25 years state prison	Some facilities. Usually outdated. Opportunities for prison "work". computer classes & Microsoft Office. Also 3 associate's degrees.	Mandated program workforce center at transitional housing. Job opportunities, trainings such as OSHA. Public library free computers.	Verified vocational services and job opportunities in some facilities using state Department of Corrections website.	Verified state Board of Parole uses transitional housing programs with workforce development services. Public library has a free computer lab
9.5 years federal prison	Took a program for federal Department of Labor certification as wood machinist. *7 Habits on the Inside*.	Used a local workforce website and had a career coach through veterans' services.	Verified both programs using the Federal Bureau of Prisons Directory of National Programs.	Verified using regional vocational services websites.
5 years state prison	None. "They didn't offer [vocational programs]. That's not their job. They could care less about your education or work."	Mandated halfway house Job Readiness program. Public library. Reentry services network agency.	Using state Department of Corrections records, I verified that there were no vocational services in the facility.	Verified halfway house, Job Readiness class, and reentry services network agency using internet websites.
1 year federal prison	"Can I just be candid? Total garbage." Most of the available classes were taught by other inmates and outdated. No computers.	Workforce service specifically for justice impacted. Resumes, cover letters, how to discuss conviction with employers.	Verified using the Federal Bureau of Prisons Directory Unable to verify whether programs are instructed by volunteers or inmates	Verified using websites.

Appendix E: Human Subjects Research Course Certificate

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 28-Sep-2019
Expiration Date N/A
Record ID 32166712

This is to certify that:

Marianne Gonta

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Student Researchers (Curriculum Group)
Student Researchers (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Walden University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wabe20921-9dff-495e-8ba0-202b4923378a-32166712

Appendix F: Example Memo

I used typed notes to capture my feelings and thoughts during each case interview and while I was listening to recordings and coding written transcripts. An example of the notes I took related to one case follows.

Memo:

I'm feeling delighted that this was my first interview. I thought this man should be a motivational speaker for prison reform and encouraging society to support correctional rehabilitation. He was not only well-spoken, but he had me cheering along with his genuine desire to do his share to help improve the world by helping other people improve themselves and their situations.

Hearing his story and the optimism and gratitude he conveyed when responding to my interview questions caused me to feel inspired by his efforts to continue improving himself over the decades he lived behind bars, and since then. I felt admiration for his ability to identify so much goodness in life after growing from youth into middle-age adulthood in s state prison environment.

As a mother, though, I felt heartbroken at the thought of losing my son to the penal system at 19 years old, quite possibly for the rest of his life and my life. As he answered my questions, he told me he grew up in prison. I thought of the psychopaths and hardcore criminals he lived with as he grew to adulthood in that environment. Working in the all-surrounding negativity of a men's prison, I felt a new sense of belief in something greater than humanity that could guide him toward goodness over decades of time in a maximum-security environment.

I thought about how different his childhood must have been from my own and from my son's. I grew up and raised my son in a rural region of the northeast, where lake swimming in the summer and skiing in the winter were favorite pastimes when we weren't involved in school-related sports and activities. Although we did not talk about his childhood, I imagined that he may have grown up inner-city where his Latino parents worked hard to provide his family a decent life to offset the established poverty, drugs, and gangs. I felt very grateful for having had the opportunities I had with the family I had in the place I was raised.

I did not ask him what happened that landed him in prison on a 30-year-to-life sentence, but during our conversations I couldn't set aside the fact that he was only 19 when it happened. I know, having a psychology background, that the human mind isn't even fully developed before the age of 25. I found myself cheering for this man when he told me "what I did personally, was to make a commitment to myself. No matter if I ever got out of prison or not, I was going to be successful." I felt he was speaking from his heart when he explained that "success" to him meant knowing he was doing something to make life

better. He said he had to work through his youthful resistance to authority and other issues first, but decided for himself to try to make life better from INSIDE prison by "heling people build better relationships to keep the peace and keep everyone included. . . . to break the cycle of violence, discrimination, and racism that existed behind the walls."

The man's perspective on his own growth, I thought, could have been a textbook example for either Rogers's person-centered or Holland's career theory. He said,

> I love learning. . . . I really love it. But, at one time, I didn't realize the potential I had to learn. I considered myself a dummy. I thought I couldn't, you know, and that was because I didn't believe in myself. And, it wasn't till I started to realize that other people made comments and would tell me, "Man, you're good at this. You're good at that." And, I started to understand. . . . that my self-esteem flourished and my self-worth and my desire to grow. And that, to me, is what has allowed me to succeed and to move forward and to thrive here after incarceration.

I had made assumptions about finding participants who had used vocational services but couldn't have predicted how well this man could speak to their value or his passion for helping provide more for people leaving incarceration after him. I was crying tears of joy when he told the story about encouraging another man that he had "walked the yard with" to go after his dream job. Adding knowledge to the research base that shows the value of vocational rehabilitation for justice-involved people has been in the back of my head from the start of my doctoral program. This interview has validated my ideas about the importance of guiding people's innate desires to achieve self-actualization.

Appendix G: Code Book

Example of First-Round to Second-Round Coding

1st-Round Codes	2nd-Round Categories
For some of us, we're just fortunate we're in the right place at the right time. In my situation with work, I say I just got lucky. Using my VA loan options, I was able to buy a house. Just to be given another opportunity at life and freedom. Luckily my previous education made that part easy. I realized how far ahead in opportunities I was. I was fortunate I was able to collect my pension for a period. My retirement and GI Bill gave me a leg up.	Blessings others did not have.
Being rejected by parole- helped prepare for rejection in society. The program allowed me to be put in the place that got me my job. I cherish the time to use them [computers]. It was inspiring to see the automation and technology involved. There's a lot of opportunities for growth. What I do is essential [employed during pandemic].	Opportunities for growth.
An officer [correctional] told me to take advantage of any computer classes. Had it not been for the library-that's where I did my first online job application. I was extremely blessed just to be on her [substance use counselor's] caseload. [Agency] helped me get a job that paid more than I'd ever made in my entire life. The halfway house enabled me to shortcut my way into the job market. Some of the guys in the halfway house gave me clothes. I live with my mother- she got to retire, and I'm paying the mortgage.	"Village" support.
Learning has come easy to me. I was blessed with good work ethic. Glad I learned those things because I implement them now in programs for others. I enjoy helping people accomplish their goals- I just enjoy the journey.	Gratitude for personal strengths.
Those are the moments that are priceless- It's not just about pay. God put me in that place. But this is where God comes in- God provided. God gave me exactly what I needed. It's such a blessing I wasn't expecting- I'm so grateful to God.	Gratitude for spiritual connection.

Example Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Themes
I had to be humble ▪ A humbling experience ▪ A little overconfident ▪ Asking for help ▪ Accept the help and grow ▪ Being incarcerated you realize how little you need ▪ No shame in using available services ▪ Felt judged ▪ Had to accept stigma ▪ Tell the truth about conviction ▪ Having the hard conversation ▪ Feeling shame or embarrassment ▪ Feeling negative emotions ▪ Not being a statistic ▪ Took any job at first ▪ Put college on the back burner ▪ Had to become responsible for myself ▪ Went in at entry level ▪	▪ Asking for and accepting help ▪ Felt judged or stigmatized ▪ Telling the truth about conviction ▪ Negative emotion ▪ Being humble	Humility
The opportunity was a blessing ▪ Spiritual connection ▪ Job market was strong ▪ Relied on skills I already had ▪ Had tech skills some people don't have ▪ Had advantages other people didn't have ▪ I realized how far ahead in opportunities I was ▪ Obtaining a job ▪ Health insurance ▪ Company vehicle ▪ Family support ▪ Come from a strong family ▪ My village ▪ Resources available at reentry ▪ Opportunities ▪ In this business before incarceration ▪ Decent place to live with decent furniture ▪ A decent car ▪ Blessed to be on her caseload ▪ They provided a temp job ▪ Other guys gave me clothes ▪ Inspiring to learn about the automation and technology ▪ Give back and you'll be blessed ▪	▪ Blessings/advantages others didn't have ▪ "Village" support ▪ Spiritual connection ▪ Opportunities and resources ▪ Sustainable employment to have more than just necessities	Gratitude
Confidence ▪ Excelling ▪ Initiative ▪ Persistence ▪ Readiness for work ▪ Readiness for opportunities ▪ Preparedness ▪ Tenacity ▪ Strong work ethic ▪ Overcoming barriers ▪ Consistency ▪ Getting out there and searching ▪ It is not easy ▪ Don't give up ▪ Continual self-improvement ▪ Determined to get out and rebuild my life ▪ Being mobile is crucial ▪ Continue to network ▪	▪ Taking the initiative ▪ Excelling not just working ▪ Tenacity/determination ▪ Strong work ethic ▪ Readiness/preparedness ▪ Doing the hard work	Perseverance
Felon-friendly agencies ▪ Valued as a skilled person ▪ Getting my life back ▪ Self-forgiveness ▪ Helping others ▪ Getting in on the ground level and proving myself ▪ Proving to myself ▪ Incentivized to go out and be the person I know I am ▪ Required to go to church/Bible study ▪ You don't have to worry who's knocking on your door ▪ You don't have that suffering or pain or stressful life ▪ Live life without criminal element ▪ Productive citizen ▪ Are we citizens? ▪	▪ Second chance/freedom ▪ Self-forgiveness ▪ Helping others/giving back ▪ Be the person I know I am ▪ Being valued as a person	Redemption
Give people hope ▪ Leading, teaching, mentoring, coaching peers ▪ Using the lived experience as a strength ▪ You know you're strong to survive that experience ▪ Making the experience a moniker for: you can come back from this ▪ You can make the next chapters in your life better than that one ▪ Don't want to go through that again ▪ There were no services, but I took responsibility for my choices and stopped blaming others ▪ I learned to be accountable ▪ I learned there are victims and to stop contributing to the bad out there ▪ Developed my spiritual relationship ▪ Improved my "spiritual space" ▪ I encourage them using myself as an example ▪ Read 300 books in 4 years ▪	▪ Leading/ mentoring peers ▪ Changes for the better because of bad experience ▪ Realized need for self-improvement ▪ Challenges make people stronger ▪ Became accountable and responsible ▪ Developed spiritual connection	Making Something Good from the Bad Experience
Autonomy ▪ Stability ▪ Success ▪ Confidence ▪ Continuing education and training ▪ Meaningful work ▪ Getting promotions ▪ Tech savvy ▪ Proving to myself ▪ I keep challenging myself ▪ Quality of life ▪ Improving abilities ▪ Voting ▪ Personal vision or mission ▪ Quality of life ▪ Be the Turtle instead of the Hare ▪ Pay my bills ▪ You like what you're doing ▪ Work is satisfying or rewarding ▪ More than just a worker ▪ Self-improvement ▪	▪ Achieving autonomy and quality of life ▪ Being a productive citizen ▪ Taking on challenges ▪ Feeling self-confident ▪ Life-long learning ▪ Doing meaningful work	Purposeful Living

Code Counts by Question

	Plan	Readiness/ abilities	Computer abilities	In-Prison services	Self-actions	Reentry services	Achieving autonomy	Meaningful work	Barriers/ strengths	Summary	Total
P	2	3	3	1	1	1	6	2	8	12	39
H	6	7	2	3	4	6	7	3	8	27	73
G	7	5	4	0	2	10	8	4	3	24	67
R	6	5	5	4	5	6	13	5	9	24	82
MG	2	4	3	1	3	5	5	6	4	18	51
PL	1	2	2	1	2	2	5	4	5	8	32
P	3	3	2	4	7	2	5	3	9	4	42
H	5	22	3	4	6	7	4	3	17	5	76
G	0	5	2	2	3	6	5	5	6	0	34
R	8	7	3	7	7	5	8	4	19	14	82
MG	6	2	3	4	6	4	6	3	8	9	51
PL	6	3	1	4	4	1	6	4	8	6	43
P	2	4	5	6	10	4	2	1	10	15	59
H	4	1	9	3	9	7	2	3	7	21	66
G	2	4	8	2	11	18	5	6	2	7	65
R	3	3	3	7	19	8	9	10	7	13	82
MG	3	10	3	5	15	6	5	9	1	11	68
PL	2	2	2	4	10	7	8	7	4	15	61
P	2	4	3	0	3	0	6	1	7	7	33
H	5	13	4	0	10	2	1	1	7	6	49
G	2	3	2	2	1	1	10	1	7	2	31
R	5	6	1	1	3	1	4	4	6	6	37
MG	5	2	0	2	1	0	5	7	3	3	28
PL	5	5	2	2	3	0	4	3	5	3	32
P	24	7	6	2	7	4	5	1	17	5	78
H	27	8	5	5	1	3	4	0	5	4	62
G	6	7	5	1	2	5	11	6	2	36	81
R	29	4	3	5	6	3	8	10	5	12	85
MG	16	2	1	1	5	4	8	9	0	12	58
PL	15	1	2	1	4	2	4	6	1	10	46
P	5	1	1	1	1	3	4	1	15	12	44
H	5	3	5	2	2	5	8	6	12	7	55
G	5	1	2	1	1	3	7	5	2	13	40
R	4	3	2	2	1	1	14	6	14	11	58
MG	1	1	3	4	3	5	2	5	8	7	39
PL	2	1	3	4	3	1	2	7	6	5	34

Note: P = Perseverance, H = Humility, G = Gratitude, R = Redemption, MG = Making Good from Bad, PL = Purposeful Living

Codes: Barriers to Employment and Strengths Used to Overcome Barriers

Barriers Code words and phrases	Code count	Strengths Code words and phrases	Code count
Stumbling stone ▪ it was difficult ▪ felony convictions ▪ felonies since before I was 18 ▪ criminal history ▪ background check ▪ never had the right to vote ▪ lost everything ▪ pain and suffering from addiction ▪ some have never had a job ▪ wasted time ▪ regrets ▪ stressful lifestyle ▪ rejection despite qualifications ▪ discouraging ▪ shame ▪ no access to computer ▪ no services in prison ▪ nothing in there.	24	Strong work ethic ▪ desire to excel ▪ don't just settle ▪ hard work ▪ took the initiative ▪ persistence ▪ perseverance ▪ be a leader ▪ set an example ▪ mentor ▪ show a better way ▪ strong interview skills ▪ self-improvement ▪ set personal milestone ▪ determined to rebuild my life ▪ strengths ▪ abilities ▪ intelligence ▪ skills ▪ prior experience and training ▪ comfortable with technology ▪ prepared ▪ ready to work ▪ job market was extremely strong ▪ essential job ▪ in this business before incarceration ▪ come from a really strong, educated family ▪ picked up pertinent information ▪ went to college ▪ was a business owner.	50
Difficulty finding employment ▪ stigma ▪ sex-offense ▪ registry and public notification ▪ unprepared ▪ rejection ▪ shame ▪ low confidence ▪ felony conviction ▪ criminal history ▪ background check ▪ over 550 collateral consequences related to conviction ▪ prison programs outdated ▪ programs set people up to fail ▪ stress ▪ regret ▪ rejected despite qualifications ▪ not an option ▪ application didn't go well ▪ discouraging ▪ not legally able because of offense ▪ conviction highly stigmatized ▪ employers did not want to be associated ▪ nobody wanted to be liable for anything related to crime ▪ more intensive supervision ▪ mandatory 5-years post-release control ▪ so are we citizens?	41	Job readiness ▪ I own the skills I already had ▪ strong resource network ▪ ability to communicate using online resources ▪ aware of technology options ▪ up to date with available technology ▪ prior experience and training ▪ taking initiative ▪ background in education ▪ prior experience ▪ skill ▪ strengths ▪ abilities ▪ intelligence ▪ tenacity ▪ a certain dumb persistence ▪ focusing on the things I do bring ▪ I've been able to persevere through dire circumstances ▪ knowing and connecting with positive people.	27
Went into prison in 1994-email and computers with internet were new to me ▪ had never done online application ▪ felt kind of overwhelming ▪ at some facilities programs were lacking or outdated ▪ felony conviction is a huge obstacle ▪ rejected by Parole Board twice ▪ the application and interview process was intimidating-I had only done basic applications long ago.	14	Very ready to work-worked throughout incarceration ▪ a lot of educational and vocational opportunities in prisons ▪ I had prepared and done a lot of work ▪ family support ▪ family kept me in touch with reality and what I would need ▪ I worked hard ▪ communication- the different aspects-not just talking but listening-also the ability to speak-to speak in front of others-to sit and share a story-to know my words have value ▪ I have a desire to remain teachable-every day is a learning experience-if you keep an open mind you can learn something from somebody-you can learn something if you stay openminded.	55

Barriers Code words and phrases	Code count	Strengths Code words and phrases	Code count
The barriers are real and very strong ▪ barriers cut me down many times ▪ very discouraging ▪ people coming back to prison who did not have a proper plan ▪ I probably felt a little overconfident ▪ did not realize how much conviction would impact ability to find work ▪ finding a house was even hard ▪ a lot of struggles ▪ surprised how a person with my skills and expertise has had to struggle to find work ▪ getting a chance is the toughest part ▪ had over a dozen interviews where I aced them and then rejected ▪ Ban the Box just delays the inevitable rejection ▪ I can't be a licensed counselor anymore ▪ I can't pull a top-secret clearance anymore ▪ Parole has impacted a lot of decisions ▪ I have to have computer monitoring even with labor jobs not allowed in people's homes ▪ the assumption that because I've been to prison I'm broken.	46	Already obtained degrees ▪ two masters degrees-one business-one counseling ▪ intelligence ▪ 4.0 GPA-getting accepted for academic reasons was easy ▪ served over 20 years in military leadership roles ▪ leadership abilities ▪ after six months got permission to use the internet ▪ self-confidence ▪ technology skills ▪ accounting skills ▪ conscientiousness ▪ I don't dabble at work-get things done ▪ I relate to people well ▪ I care about people ▪ business management skills ▪ strong personal vision and mission ▪ personal networking skills ▪ interviewing skills ▪ job search skills ▪ prison does not break everybody ▪ attention to detail ▪ perseverance ▪ I'm a person who keeps pushing and wanting to make things happen ▪ don't give up.	34
Not making enough money to be an independent responsible citizen ▪ getting paid based on mistakes not skillset ▪ people judge you based on criminal record ▪ they make you feel you should be grateful for what they'll give you ▪ I was scared to death nobody would hire me ▪ they're going to turn me down ▪ fed myself these messages that nobody would hire me ▪ had [only] a high school diploma ▪ this felony conviction looming over my head ▪ being another statistic for somebody else to look down on ▪ penal system doesn't care about your education or work ▪ they didn't offer anything ▪ nobody cared whether you had books ▪ I was ashamed ▪ how long and tough the road has been ▪ signed up to vote at 18 lost my right to vote all in the same year ▪ Haven't voted in 31 years.	40	Productive ▪ responsible ▪ God and village ▪ I provide a needed skillset ▪ persistence ▪ I have an impeccable resume ▪ I was relentless ▪ I refused to give up ▪ I fought to have my name and record cleared ▪ I interview well ▪ I would apply where my background would be a benefit ▪ I speak the language of recovery ▪ I'm always up for learning ▪ I enrolled in college ▪ I soaked information up like a sponge ▪ I have a lot to give ▪ I would do whatever I had to do to find a job ▪ I was reliable ▪ I was consistent ▪ I'm not satisfied with just doing my job ▪ I knew how to search the internet and attach a resume- always been tech savvy ▪ determined ▪ tenacity ▪ fortitude ▪ courage in spite of ▪ a job in alignment with what I'm doing ▪ I love my job.	53
When incarcerated burden is placed on family ▪ retirement payments to family got cut off ▪ case was so high profile ▪ people apprehensive about attaching name to mine ▪ not in good mental space ▪ prison was traumatizing ▪ emotional baggage ▪ shame ▪ embarrassment felt because of conviction ▪ prison upset my whole life trajectory ▪ vocational programs were total garbage ▪ didn't even have computers ▪ people with typed resume would at a disadvantage ▪ have to reveal conviction ▪ people have biases ▪ had job offers but then had to reveal ▪ some organizations will hire people with convictions but have a plateau.	22	Knew how to create a resume, network, job search ▪ had strong credentials ▪ technical education background ▪ felt good about my skills ▪ had a house and family ▪ had a full breadth of life before prison ▪ highly educated ▪ more advanced than others educationally ▪ always eager to learn ▪ love to go to school ▪ find value in my work ▪ excites me on the inside to be a servant leader ▪ facing hard challenges ▪ perseverance ▪ have to have tough skin ▪ not internalizing rejection ▪ keeping life organized ▪ continuing to hone skills ▪ persistence.	48

Note. Counts reflect multiple instances of codes repeated in the same cases.

Code Counts by Case and Theme

Redemption	Humility	Gratitude	Making good	Perseverance	Purposeful living	Total
82	76	34	51	42	43	**328**
85	62	79	58	78	46	**408**
82	66	65	68	49	61	**391**
37	49	31	28	33	32	**210**
82	73	67	51	39	32	**344**
58	55	40	39	44	34	**270**
426	**381**	**316**	**295**	**285**	**248**	**1,951**